7 Educational Assessment in an Era of Reform
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Until the second half of the 1970s educational assessment attracted relatively little attention. There was a general consensus that teachers were responsible for teaching and assessment in the classroom, and that examining boards provided external certification. In contrast, assessment practices and outcomes are now matters of public debate. There appear to be three major factors (which are not unique to the United Kingdom) which have brought about this change.

First, far larger numbers of students are being brought within the processes of monitoring and selection, to which assessment is central. This is a result of the widening of access to education, including the creation of the CSE examination in the 1960s, the raising of the school-leaving age in the 1970s, and the more recent creation of a common examination at sixteen, increased access to post-sixteen qualifications and a greatly expanded Further and Higher Education sector. Elsewhere in the world there has been considerable widening of access to educational provision in newly independent countries, and increased demands as populations have grown.

Secondly, governments have become more concerned about the value of their investments in education and training, and now wish to monitor outputs much more carefully. The concern has been fuelled by the need for increased international competitiveness, leading to a greater demand for the specification of required educational outputs, and the establishment of mechanisms to assess student performance and attainment. The third factor is a matter of practical expediency: standards can be levered up and curriculum changes effected more quickly by changing assessment demands than by changing inputs to the education system.

Thus, educational assessments, tests and examinations have been a major focus in debates about education in the UK and elsewhere during the last twenty years. Murphy and Torrance (1987), Broadfoot (1996), Gipps (1994), Black (1998) and others have reviewed in detail various aspects of the way in which this has occurred, and the pressures which have resulted. It has clearly become necessary to ensure that assessment is of
the highest quality, and seen to be so, so that there has been a drive
to improve the way in which assessments are conducted, to clarify the
function which they perform in communicating information about
educational changes in individuals, schools and larger groupings, and –
perhaps most significantly of all – to understand the influence which
they have upon the curriculum experiences of learners.

An illustration of the way in which assessment is clearly seen as a power­
ful influence when it comes to understanding the forces that shape
education policy and practice can be seen in Nuttall’s (1984) analysis of
the changes that led up to the launch of the GCSE examination in the
late 1980s. The paper lays out a very clear analysis of the way in which
the move to that particular assessment system was linked very closely to
curriculum debates and the desire of central government to take a much
more interventionist stance in relation to the curriculum experienced by
pupils in UK schools.

The DES has taken upon itself a much more overt role in steering
examination reforms and giving themselves rights (unprecedented
since 1945) over the approval of the detailed content of examination
syllabuses and schemes of examination, since it is the DES that have
the final say over national criteria. Having failed in their attempts to
control or influence markedly the curriculum through documents like
A Framework for the School Curriculum they can succeed by another
route, at least for the curriculum of secondary schools (Nuttall 1984,
p. 174).

From the early 1980s the notion of assessment-led curriculum
change became commonplace, and the scene was set for the sub­
sequent battles over the introduction of a national curriculum, covering
four stages of schooling from five to sixteen, with attainment targets,
four layers of assessment arrangements linked to the four key stages of
schooling, and school performance tables (Murphy 1987 and 1989).
These are issues to which we will return during this chapter as we
present an overview of educational assessment changes and the way in
which they have contributed to the formation and implementation of
educational policy.

We wish also to reflect upon what is known about educational assess­
ment at the end of the twentieth century. Do we, for example, have at
our disposal methods of assessment, techniques of analysing assessment
data, or insights into how assessment can be employed most effectively,
which will allow us to plan the use of assessment in education in a more