

School Entry Assessment: Praiseworthy or Perilous?

The Tensions Between Formative and Summative Purposes

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Abstract

The New Zealand education system has undergone radical change in a number of areas in recent years. Policies for assessment at both local and national levels outline clearly that assessment is to be carried out for both formative and summative purposes and contend that in some contexts information from a single assessment task can be used for both purposes. These purposes are presented as complementary rather than contradictory, ignoring a body of literature which states that one set of assessment data used for two or more purposes creates problems and tensions.

School Entry Assessment (SEA), a kit containing three nationally standardised, performance based activities has been designed to assess some of the key knowledge and skills of new entrant children. Recently introduced in New Zealand primary schools, the kit focuses on the areas of emergent literacy, oral language and numeracy. An analysis of documentation accompanying SEA reveals that the information from assessment tasks is intended to be used for both formative and summative purposes.

This paper reports on the results of an investigation into how selected schools in the Auckland area make use of the data gained from SEA, examines some of the issues surrounding the formative and summative uses of such information and explores schools' underlying reasons for becoming part of a non mandatory scheme.

Background

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1993) has outlined a number of purposes for assessment and several different contexts in which this assessment will occur. One of these contexts is at key transition points of the schooling system. It is stated in the framework document that key transition point assessment will “*help to identify the needs of groups of students as they enter new phases of schooling and so assist teachers and the government to target resources more effectively*” (Ministry of

Education, 1993, p.25). One of the transition points identified is the entry to formal schooling. As a result, early in 1997, a School Entry Assessment (SEA) kit containing a series of nationally standardised assessment tasks, was made available for use in schools. The kit contained three performance based assessment activities: Concepts About Print (CAP), Check Out: a shopping game to assess Numeracy and Tell Me: a story retelling activity to assess Oral Language. The stated purposes of these activities were:

1. to identify some of the key knowledge and skills of new entrants which will be used as a basis for the planning of programmes;
2. to provide information for school management about their new entrant cohort to assist planning and the allocation of resources;
3. to monitor student progress and analyse barriers to learning;
4. to provide aggregated information to the Ministry of Education to inform national policy development and resource allocation

(Ministry of Education, 1997b, p.5 -6).

Formative assessment is defined here as assessment of children's learning as part of the ongoing internal component of good teaching. It is used to enhance the learning teaching process through linking teacher responsiveness to children's needs. Summative assessment is more concerned with the external reporting of student achievement (See Dixon, 1998 in progress; Crooks, 1988). An analysis of the information contained in the SEA kit shows that it is intended that assessment be carried out for both formative and summative purposes. This ignores a body of literature which argues that one set of assessment information used for two or more purposes, causes problems and tensions in the kinds of results and reporting it demands, the use to which results are put and the conditions under which assessment is administered (Broadfoot, 1988; Gipps, Broadfoot, Dockerell, Harlen & Nuttall, 1992). Such issues are exacerbated when assessment procedures that attempt to

combine a formative and summative purpose are encouraged. Furthermore, within the context of SEA the requirement to report summative data to the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) has the potential to move assessment from 'low stakes' to 'high stakes'. The proposal by the government that school entry assessment data be used for two different and possibly conflicting purposes has major implications for teachers' work (Sullivan, 1997).

Methodology

Aims

While SEA is not mandatory, schools have been actively encouraged by the Ministry to implement these assessment procedures. It is important therefore to investigate how SEA information is being utilised, the nature of any tension existing between formative and summative uses of the information and the underlying reasons schools have for becoming involved in the scheme. This research project was designed as an exploratory study to examine these issues.

Sample

The participants involved were new entrant teachers from ten schools selected randomly within the greater Auckland area. The sample, while not representative of the total school population, was illustrative of geographic areas, socio economic groups, and to a lesser extent school size.

Interviews

A structured interview schedule incorporating findings from the relevant literature was constructed using questions likely to elicit valid information about SEA. Participants' responses were taped and transcribed, responses were analysed, content categories established, and these categories were then used to develop themes.

Findings

SEA was implemented in varying ways. Seven of the ten schools administered all the SEA tasks. Three of the schools however elected to administer either one or two of the tasks. Of these, one school chose to use the numeracy task only and two elected to use both CAP and the numeracy task but not the oral language task. These three schools made their decision on the basis of the manageability of the assessment tasks and the time expended in relation to the usefulness of the information gained. In eight of the ten schools, the new entrant teacher(s) had responsibility for carrying out SEA. The exceptions were an assistant principal who took responsibility for its administration and a teacher who was employed specifically to carry out assessment in the junior school.

All but two schools surveyed stated they were using SEA to supplement their own new entrant assessment practices. In order to trial SEA, the two exceptions had, albeit temporarily, ceased to administer their own new entrant assessment procedures, explaining that because of the time involved it was impossible to manage both SEA and their own assessment tasks. Many of the teachers surveyed agreed that SEA was giving them information additional to that gained from their own new entrant assessment procedures. The schools surveyed utilised information gained from SEA in a variety of ways.

Formative uses

Teachers identified some ways in which they used SEA information formatively, particularly in the area of Numeracy. For example, most of the teachers interviewed stated that they used the information gained from the Numeracy task to group children and to plan appropriate programmes for them:

“...it’s telling me a lot more about their actual ability to handle number ...watching the kids work with this and looking at what they can do mentally, I do think we have been putting them into number at too low a level, too long on low level number work when they’re actually capable of moving on much more quickly.” (Teacher #3);

“ ... for the classroom teacher it is giving practical information that they can use., it would help with grouping. One little boy, I put him straight into a higher maths group. I thought if he knows that much. I’m sure he’ll be fine there. It helps with planning and what you’re trying to do is take them from where they are... I mean that’s good practice, you know where they are now, you know the next step.” (Teacher # 1).

A few teachers alluded to the formative usefulness of administering CAP:

“... with the reading, if those children came in and had a huge number of book skills, you need to make sure they’re not getting the same ones in shared book.” (Teacher #3).

but most teachers did not offer explanations about CAP's formative use, rather they commented upon the fact that many children had already acquired at least some of the skills that CAP assesses:

“I’ve been surprised at the CAP too, that some of them [the children] have done far more than I thought they would be able to do.” (Teacher # 10).

The formative value and use of information gained from the Oral Language task was much more difficult to ascertain. While half of the teachers said it gave them more information about children's oral language which was very useful:

“I think the Tell Me is giving us information about how children learn, about their language structures and how they organise their ideas.” (Teacher 8),

none were able to elaborate in detail how they utilised the information in a formative way. This may be related partly to the content knowledge teachers have in the area of oral language. Dixon (in progress) found that teachers' lack of content knowledge in specific curriculum areas impinged on their ability to utilise, in a formative way, information gained about children's learning in that particular curriculum area. A few of the teachers interviewed in the present study alluded to this:

“...we haven't really taught oral language as such and I'm not sure that we know how to. I think it's the most important language skill and the least taught, explored.” (Teacher #2).

The relationship between the formative use of assessment information and teachers' own professional knowledge was reinforced further, by teachers who explained that while they had been trained in administration of the assessment tasks, they had not been trained in the effective formative utilisation of this information:

“...when I went on this course it was really just how to take it [assessment] not really to get information out of it and how to use it. I think that could be another step that could follow up... how to sort of evaluate the results and where to go to with the children ... but nothing like this has happened, so until it happens, it probably won't be beneficial, it'll just be a lot of data at the moment.” (Teacher #5).

In fact almost half of the teachers interviewed explained that they were not utilising the information gained from SEA in a formative manner:

“... more data to collect. I can't really see any benefit at the moment, like I said, I'm giving myself a year and I'll see. It gives me additional information but whether that's actually necessary information I've yet to find out.” (Teacher #5);

“... well at the moment not much. I'm collecting data at the moment basically I'm hoping that as I do more of it that I'll probably find more use for it.” (Teacher # 7).

Some of the teachers, particularly those in low decile schools where English was perhaps less likely to be the children's first language, expressed the view that information gained about oral language was of less formative use to them than their own oral language assessment tasks:

“I found the test I gave before probably gave a good indication anyway and it was a lot faster that particular test and time is precious.” (Teacher #6);

“ ... in the retelling I’m not getting any more information than I’m getting from other sections of our own oral language checking ... and retelling is very, very hard for our kids.” (Teacher # 7).

Others felt that much of the information obtained from SEA was less useful to them than the information they had gained from their own previously developed new entrant assessment tasks. They perceived that these tasks had been more useful and provided more relevant information about individual learning needs:

“I do more with the information I’ve been collecting before this test because to me it’s very practical work, it shows me where the children are at and their needs.” (Teacher # 8).

From the teachers’ responses, it seemed clear that the usefulness of the information in a formative sense, was dependent very much on the comprehensiveness of their own previously developed new entrant assessment procedures, the specific assessment task involved and their own curriculum content knowledge in that particular area.

Summative uses

Many of the teachers involved in this study noted that they made summative use of SEA data. Some said they collated results and would graph them for reporting to their principals, Boards of Trustees and the Education Review Office (ERO). They believed that these graphs would assist them in comparing one year’s new entrant cohort with another:

“...at the moment it’s purely the classroom teacher looking at it. I haven’t collated it or made any graphs or anything. I want to collate it... we’re going to have ERO in next term” (Teacher #2);

“...next year it’ll go into a booklet for parents to look at, for our board to look at.”
(Teacher #4).

Other summative uses of SEA data included: the recording of results in individual children’s files for use as a reference point, the monitoring of individual progress and for reporting to parents:

“I’m going to use it (CAP) to monitor that they’re progressing appropriately”. (Teacher #3).

It can be seen therefore, that the summative focus was on providing evidence that learning had occurred. Implicit in the teachers’ statements was their need to gather information to support their professional judgements.

Eight of the ten schools supplied the Ministry with SEA summary data about their new entrant cohort. This reporting of information to build a national database caused schools some concern. Interestingly enough, although most teachers were willing to supply the Ministry with information related to the cognitive capabilities of their new entrant cohort, they thought there was a government agenda attached to this requirement. The exact nature of this agenda was however, less obvious to them. Some hoped that it would make a positive difference to schools in terms of funding and resources:

“I really hope that in the long run it’s going to prove that some schools and especially this sort of school because we’re not in Mangere or Otara,

there may be resources come from them [the Ministry] I don't know. Whether it's in the way of extra staffing or whether it's in the way of extra materials or what I don't know but surely if we come out the bottom of the pile, especially in the language, they're really going to look at resourcing us a bit better, instead of us having to find ways, so maybe they'll respond to it...otherwise what's the point in doing it?" (Teacher #1).

Others were less positive:

"I felt and still feel cynically enough, that there is an agenda and I don't know why. Why is the Ministry intent on collecting this data? If it's to better resource schools, well fine, I'm happy with that but I get the feeling it's not. What is it going to be? Oh, I don't know, I really don't know. I hope that class sizes will be affected by it positively. I hope so. I doubt it. God, I'm cynical. I've been here too long." (Teacher #4).

Schools' reasons for carrying out SEA tasks

A variety of reasons were identified by teachers when questioned regarding the reasons for their schools' use of SEA.

Half of the teachers interviewed wanted standardised assessment procedures. They hoped that standardised measures would provide benchmarks and consistency both within their own school and nationally:

"... it's important to have a benchmark. Well I think we should be comparing, well we do here anyway, we compare not really so much it's not so much with children in other schools but we compare each year ...We're really only interested in our school but I can see there's

some benefit from having nationwide ones you're getting an idea where kiddies are." (Teacher #3).

It was also significant, that while some of the teachers wanted to see standardised assessment procedures, they were also aware that these standardised procedures would not necessarily give schools information related to the needs of their particular new entrant cohort:

"... but each school provides their own baseline data anyway, that suits their children and their school. What we do probably wouldn't suit School X. School X [could] say, why put in words and letters? Our kids come in with nothing, so why waste everybody's time and make the kid uptight, because they don't know them. Whereas when our kids come in, a lot of them know all their letters and so that [model] suits us." (Teacher #2).

Gipps and Murphy (1994) have argued that the movement towards more formalised standardised procedures is unlikely to be the panacea that many teachers give it credit for. In fact, they argue that standardised procedures do not provide the best opportunities for children to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understandings. This, they have contended is especially true of children for whom English is not their first language, or for children with special needs. Some writers (e.g. Torrance, 1993; Torrance & Pryor, 1995) make a subtle but important distinction between

- a.) **if** a child knows something and
- b.) **what** a child knows, which may be two very different things.

The two previous comments from teachers show the dilemmas they face currently as they reconcile the benefits of standardised assessment procedures which may show **if**

a child has acquired particular skills, with non-standardised procedures which may in fact provide more relevant and useful information about **what** the child knows.

All of the teachers from Decile 1 schools thought it important that the Ministry was aware of the abilities of their new entrant cohort:

“I thought well if we don’t do it people won’t know anything about the level of the children we’re getting in a school like ours. If a school such as ours said oh no, you can’t do it with our kids, they’d have skewed information collected, so I thought we’re going to send it down. We’re a Decile 1 school and it will show what our kids can and can’t do and it’ll show that we make a difference.” (Teacher #6).

Another teacher interviewed from a Decile 1 school in South Auckland thought it important that there was standardised data available from across the country which would enable them to compare themselves with other South Auckland schools, in order to gauge the relative effectiveness of their school and its programmes:

“...we need to know where we’re at. There’s no guidance even in South Auckland about what level children should be reading at at a certain age. I’d like to have some benchmarks for us as teachers, some direction so that if you’re achieving you can be proud of it. They say X is a good school but we’ve got no proof of that. There’s no way of identifying those good schools, so let’s find out. If there’s a school achieving more, I want proof.” (Teacher #7).

Codd, McAlpine & Poskitt (1995) have argued that assessment information may well be used to ensure the contestability of educational provision. This study indicates that some schools, particularly those in the lower decile rankings, wanted to use SEA

results as a market indicator, to provide data which consumers could use to exercise market choice.

Despite the fact that many of the teachers interviewed in this research project were very satisfied with the new entrant assessment procedures developed in their own schools, some were considering replacing them with SEA. Although not able to articulate clearly the reasons for such decisions, it seemed that confidence in their own professional ability had been undermined. To meet possible contractual obligations, it appears they preferred to adopt the procedures advocated by an external agency. They did not appear to have confidence to promote their own, possibly more robust assessment procedures. Sullivan (1994, 1997) has contended that this is typical of teachers when they perceive that there is little trust in their ability:

“....well we were asked if we’d like to do it and I said yes. We were quite happy with our own assessment but we said we’d do it as a trial ... shortly we’ll decide whether we’re going back to our own one that was very straight forward or use SEA and at this stage we’ll probably go with the School Entry Assessment one I think but I still have reservations”.
(Teacher #2).

Tensions between formative and summative purposes

In elaborating on the reasons why schools have become involved in the SEA scheme, the teachers interviewed alluded to its formative use. Further investigation of their responses revealed however, that at the present time the formative use of SEA information is limited. It was the summative aspects, those of recording assessment information and reporting it to interested stake holders which were more easily identifiable.

There have in recent years been repeated calls for teachers to become more accountable and in New Zealand this accountability of teachers has been pursued rigorously through significantly increased levels of assessment of children (Snook, 1994). Although not explicitly stated, some of the teachers interviewed alluded to teacher accountability and the use of SEA as an accountability device and as a mechanism to allocate an ever decreasing pool of resources.

“...you put it in your fax machine. It goes to Wellington and we’re told in our little book that this is to be used for looking at areas of need but I always feel there’s an agenda behind anything but it’s not who shall we give the money to because there is no money, so what is the agenda? And if they’re going to get all these results from schools to say the kids are able to do this, that and the other, and what is happening because they can’t do this, that and the other a year later, are they going to use it as fuel against teachers and what they’re doing in the first year at school.” (Teacher #5).

The possibility of SEA being used as a tool to hold teachers and schools accountable was also implicit in teachers’ responses when they explained that although SEA was not yet mandatory, it was likely, ultimately, to become so:

“...at the moment it’s not essential that we do SEA but I do believe in a couple of years we’ll be made to do it. I think it’s coming.” (Teacher #9);

“ I can see why the Ministry is doing this. This is going to be everyone does it [SEA] so they can have some kind of standardised thing. They say no at the moment but I know it is going to happen because they have spent thousands on those kits haven’t they?” (Teacher # 2).

Summary

Evidence from the current research project indicates that while schools were using the information gained from SEA in both formative and summative ways, there was a definite focus upon the latter. Many teachers acknowledged that while they were able to collect SEA data, it was considerably harder to utilise it formatively. Some evidence demonstrated that teachers' ability to utilise the assessment information in a formative manner was a function of their content and related curriculum knowledge.

The summative purposes for which schools were using SEA data were more readily identified and articulated. Although not explicitly stated, there was evidence to show that the documented results were likely to be used for accountability purposes, with schools using SEA as hard data to support their professional judgements. There was also some indication that teachers regarded the Ministry's requirement to report the summarised data, both positively and negatively, with a few being decidedly uncomfortable with this arrangement. In some instances, schools were keen for the results to be used as a market indicator of their effectiveness, while at the same time being aware that this could have a detrimental effect on their schools if children did not make the expected academic gains.

The use of SEA for predominantly summative purposes, shifts assessment from a low stakes to a high stakes situation if the results of children's achievement are used to compare the effectiveness of schools. School Entry Assessment has some potential to contribute beneficially to the individualising of instruction related to the needs of particular children if teachers have the ability to use it formatively. It has also, in its summative use, the potential to be used as another means by which to ensure the accountability of teachers.

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