

Views of students on Summative Assessment: What does the Research Tell Us

The research on 'student voice' focuses substantially on issues of school organisation, curriculum and teaching and learning. Where it does address assessment, this tends to be 'formative' rather than 'summative' assessment. However, there are passing references to students' views on formal assessment and testing, which have been drawn upon in this summary.

In the past, research in schools, including school effectiveness research, rarely sought the views of 'consumers' in schools – the pupils - though some ethnographic case studies of single schools did so. More recently however, high profile research projects such as the ESRC-funded 'Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning' and earlier work by Fielding and Rudduck (e.g. Fielding, 2001; Rudduck et al, 1996) have stimulated greater interest from many schools in seeing consultation of their pupils as a critical element of the school improvement process. A few schools have gone further, involving them as active participants in classroom-based research investigations to help them identify ways of improving teaching and learning.

The ESRC project explored pupils' perspectives on what they felt made a difference to their learning and achievement, and their views of the kinds of teaching strategies they felt would help them to succeed. For example, the pupils' perspectives reported by Flutter and Rudduck (2004) included:

- factors they felt sustained their engagement with learning
- factors they felt affected their confidence in their ability to learn
- the impact of friendships on their learning
- their understanding of the criteria for 'good' work
- how the way time is managed in school affected their learning.

The researchers identified a range of factors that appeared to shape pupils' confidence as learners and these included pupils' understanding of assessment

Pupils' perceptions of assessment

In the ESRC project, how assessment was explained to pupils seemed to make a difference to their confidence in their ability to learn. Pupils felt more confident about their ability to learn when they understood that assessment could help them make progress with their learning. Where the purposes of assessment were not made clear, 'tests' seemed to make pupils very 'conscious of what they could *not* do rather than what they *could* do'. This is consistent with Black's (2004, p.17) contention that 'by actively involving pupils in the test process, pupils can see that they can be beneficiaries rather than victims of testing, because tests can help them improve their learning'. One of the KMOFAP teachers confirmed this (Black et al, 2003) when she reported from the students' comments that the pressure to succeed in tests was being replaced by the need to understand the work that has been covered, the test identifying what needs more work and what has been understood.

In contrast, earlier findings following the introduction of the National Curriculum (Pollard et al, 1994) suggested that primary school pupils enjoyed the experience of National Curriculum testing, the early assessment procedures in particular, broadening the curriculum. Though the same authors noted that this subsequently changed, as testing procedures were narrowed and teaching programmes focused more on what was tested, reducing the scope for pupils to demonstrate their understandings. The PACE project (Pollard et al, 2000) on the implementation of the National Curriculum in primary schools, suggested that motivation and engagement were adversely affected by testing. The research noted that pupils were aware of teacher judgements in many ways. Reay and Wiliam (1999) reported that many children were anxious during formal testing procedures and were very aware of their limitations in performance.

In the ESRC project, pupils sometimes misinterpreted processes like target setting, intended to help them improve the quality of their work. Rather than giving pupils an idea of how they were performing and what they needed to do to improve, targets could appear to be an obscure hurdle to them, as this pupil explained:

‘No one has ever talked to me about the targets ... like, no one has ever told me how I can reach that target ...’ (Y10 girl)

Thus, it seems that pupils identify being given opportunities to understand the summative assessment process and expectations of them in it as critical to making use of summative assessment for the purposes of learning. This perhaps, is one of many points at which summative and formative assessment meet?

Pupils’ perceptions of formative assessment through self assessment

Some studies of pupil self assessment for summative purposes suggest that increasing involvement in self assessment may both enhance subsequent summative performance and enable summative assessment to be a more meaningful experience. Brookhart et al, (2004) in the primary sector in US involved pupils in predicting and graphing their test scores on weekly multiplication tests. Pupils were invited to reflect on whether they had met their goal from the previous week, set a new goal and outline a strategy for achieving it. The authors reported that on average the pupils predicted their achievements accurately with considerable variation but they became more accurate over time. The pupils attributed their success in the task to both practice and memory and there was evidence of greater reflection and metacognition suggesting that within a rote learning task tested for summative purposes, the use of self assessment can increase the formative potential.

In a study of school leavers in the Caribbean, McDonald and Boud (2003) trained students in self assessment and reported an increase in performance in external exams significantly higher compared to the control group. Students indicated that it assisted them in their planning and preparation for the exams but also had wider impact on their perceptions of their careers and learning. They felt they were more analytical, critical and independent and that they improved their study skills.

General issues about consulting students

The ESRC project identified a number of issues to be considered in the process of developing consultation with students. These included:

- whether expectations about what students can contribute if consulted need to be raised;
- how consultation can be used to find ways of improving how positively pupils view their engagement with learning;
- use of consultation data to identify the kinds of difficulties encountered by different groups of pupils e.g. with specific social, ethnic and gender characteristics to develop strategies to support these groups;
- ensuring pupils have someone to talk to (an older peer or an adult) about their learning as this seems to help raise their confidence in themselves as learners;
- creating opportunities for pupils to develop a clear understanding of how assessment could help them improve their work.

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