

# Discussion Paper: Questions for School Leaders

Ruth Sutton, March 2010

## The Context

1. It is now over twenty years since the first global meta-analysis of the link between educational assessment and student learning and achievement was published (1988). Since then numerous studies have been done and much written and discussed, in Canada and elsewhere, about the potential of "Assessment for Learning". The principles of this approach were enshrined in the Western and Northern Protocol on Classroom Assessment in 2006, and more recently in Surrey SD itself in its 'position paper' issued to schools in 2009.
2. Parallel and closely linked to these developments, we have witnessed a radical change in the definition and presentation of learning, caused by digital communication and the almost universal access of students to these new forms of communication. The skills required to use these new forms effectively were largely unexplored in schools twenty years ago and now are everywhere, not only as teaching tools but also chiefly as learning tools, both in school and beyond. Educators have had to adapt to the implications of this change, and will continue to do so.
3. A number of tensions arise as a result of these changes that have a particular bearing on the organization of curriculum, teaching methods and assessment approaches used in secondary schools:
  - Knowledge and skills no longer fit neatly into the separate subject boxes of the customary secondary curriculum. Skills such as Literacy, digital competence and confidence, problem-solving, independent and interdependent work habits – and more – all cross subject boundaries and need to be developed coherently and systematically in our schools. The separation of teaching in most secondary schools into separate subject teams, competing with each other for time, space and respect, is a barrier to the necessary re-consideration of how secondary schooling is framed.
  - Student expectations around learning have changed and continue to do so: out of school learning has become more engaging, more personal, and more under the control of the individual learners and their peers, often working together. In school these same students have far less control over what they learn and the pace and style of that learning. This is not to say that students should control all these factors in school: teachers are employed as guides and experts in their own areas precisely to take this responsibility. But teachers' focus must be firmly on learning rather than teaching: we must recognize that no matter how diligently the teacher works, effective learning does not happen if the learner is disengaged, bored, unmotivated, or even absent – in spirit if not in

body. Learning is currently changing faster than teaching and gap needs to be closed.

- Inextricably linked to our beliefs and practices around curriculum and teaching are our practices around assessment and reporting. Within the old paradigm - in which knowledge is fixed, in the hands of teachers as experts, and transmitted by them to students - the control of assessment was relatively straightforward. Teachers controlled the modes of assessment, the success criteria, the judgments made and the information to be given to others, including the students and their families. Dealing with subject-specific knowledge and skill was also relatively straightforward. Tests, either external or internal, generated outcomes that could be described in number form, and these numbers were readily translated into grades. The traditions and practices of grading developed increasingly as forms of control, at a time when other means of controlling students were gradually eroding. In order to defend grading decisions in an increasingly skeptical and litigious climate, schools and teachers resort to gathering more 'marks' which are then manipulated statistically to 'prove' the correctness of the teacher's judgment. The issue of 'zeros', for example, is a form of control that has major statistical implications, hence its tenacity and contentiousness of the issue.

### **No Change is not an Option**

4. Faced with these long-term and inexorable changes, schools and teachers are able to resist major changes in the fundamentals of secondary education for a while, especially where the cracks and disconnects are not yet easy to discern. We rely on the passivity of our students and the trust of our communities to keep uncomfortable messages at bay. Many students do well, and will always do so. Some students learn despite their teachers rather than because of them; others become over-dependent on their teachers and pay the price for that later; others students again become restless, bored and disheartened and give up, either failing to graduate or consciously under-achieving.
5. There comes a time, however, when we need to step further back and re-examine the purpose and impact of what we do. I believe - you may or not agree - we are at the point in secondary schooling where 'no change is not an option'. Even without major changes in the shape and structures of schooling as a whole, immediate adjustments are necessary and possible in the ways we plan and structure secondary learning, and how we assess, provide feedback, and report to parents and others. None of these will be easy or instantaneous, but the first steps are overdue, in some schools at least. As education leaders we need to have a clear, evidence-driven vision of where we need to go, and to plan the early steps along that road with intelligence, courage and perseverance. The starting point will differ from school to school, but the destination will be the same. The question therefore is not whether we start this journey but where we start.

6. Every school is unique, a mix of details and dynamics understood only by those who work in it and sometimes not even by them. School leaders' first step is to think long and hard about the school itself. There a number of starting points, to unpick and then re-construct the basic habits of learning, teaching and assessment: here are some to consider and the critical questions that go with them.

### **Starting points and questions**

- a) Focus on 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning:

Question: In a digital age, when technology allows young people far greater control over what and how they learn out of school, how do we match that in school?

- b) Focus on improving 'standards' and student achievement

Questions: how do we get more of our young people to achieve more? Where are the current gaps and areas of under-achievement? How do we acknowledge these as a school without blame and defensiveness? What evidence do we have about how this happens? Is under-achievement entirely beyond our control as educators? Which aspects of it can/should we do something about?

- c) Focus on increased graduation rates

Questions: How do we get more of our young people to hang in there for longer and graduate? When, how and why do some of our students decide to give up? For which aspects of that decision should we accept responsibility, and intervene? What exactly will this intervention entail, and how do we manage it successfully?

- d) Focus on teacher learning and 'action research'

Question: Given many teachers' skepticism about research findings generated 'elsewhere', how do we encourage more of our teachers to ask searching questions about our own school's practices and pursue curious professional investigation into alternative approaches, tailored to our local circumstances and our students' needs.

- e) Focus on clarifying our shared beliefs about learning and motivation

Questions: As a group of educators sharing the same building, what do we really believe about learning and motivation and the connections between them? If we do not agree about these fundamentals of our work, how can we provide a coherent educational experience for our students? If we do agree, how do our shared beliefs manifest themselves in the ways we do business?

- f) Focus on the school's processes of assessment and reporting

Questions: How do we move away from "mathematical/statistical constructs" – some of which may be spurious – as the basis of grading, and towards the firmer foundation of "shared professional judgment". Province-wide assessments have well designed tasks and controlled marking but there are doubts about the

'validity' of the conclusions, as the test can pick up some of the desired learning outcomes but not others. The classroom is a better place to find valid evidence, but only where the assessment tasks are very well designed, and the variable of teachers' individual judgments is reduced through clear criteria, discussion and exemplification of the range of standards which determine grades. The focus on 'shared professional judgment' is now paramount in assessment in Scotland, Wales, New Zealand and some provinces of Australia as a response to evidence about the costs of external testing, the damaging impact on teaching and insufficient improvement in student achievement. The pursuit of 'shared professional judgment' improves professional sharing, and the quality of teaching and assessment design. Teachers' greater clarity of the expected learning outcomes and the evidence generated through assessment tasks lead to students' improved understanding what is expected of them, and greater opportunity for involvement in the assessment process. Both of these have a positive impact on learning and achievement.

g) Focus on parental expectations

Question: How do we help students and their families understand the flaws – both technical and educational – in our current approach to both assessment and reporting, without undermining their confidence in our professional practice?

*Ruth Sutton, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2010*