**The Summative and Formative Assessment of Students, Schools and Systems in Sri Lanka**

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In the world of education the term *assessment* is used variously to discuss the performance of students, teachers, schools and systems. The terms assessment and evaluation are often used interchangeably. In this paper I will use the term assessment to refer to both assessment and evaluation. The terms *summative assessment* and *formative assessment* used mostly in relation to students and teachers. They are used less frequently in relation to schools and education systems. The purpose of this paper is to distinguish summative from formative assessment and to show how both types of assessment can, in principle, be employed to bring about improvements in the learning of **Students**, of **Schools** and of the education **System**.

***Summative and formative assessment of student learning***

We are all familiar with summative assessments as they relate to students. The purpose of national examinations, end-of-year tests and end–of-term tests is to provide a judgement of the level of student learning at the end of a course of study. The judgement is made in relation to a set of criteria (criterion based assessment) or the performance of others (norm based assessment) and is a summative assessment. When these judgments are used to select persons for future education and occupations or life chances in general they are referred to high stakes summative assessments.

In Sri Lanka these summative assessments occur frequently and are the subject of intense debate by students, teachers, school principals, education managers and parents alike. Teachers, principals, zones, the examinations department, NEREC and others use summative assessments of student learning for varying purposes. Teachers, principals and exam authorities use the information from term, end of year, Grade 5, GCE O/A Levels to rank/grade students and to provide feedback to students and their parents about their place in the rank order. These tests are designed, administered and marked by various persons (teachers, ISAs, Officers, subject examiners etc). The information is used, *inter alia*, by teachers, principals and education officers to motivate students, by schools and universities to select students for further education, by employers to select young persons for employment, by parents to seek access for their children to prestigious schools, by parents in choosing partners for their offspring, by officers and politicians to mete rewards and punishments to school principals and teachers.

By contrast, the goal of formative assessment of students is to monitor student learning in order to provide timely *feedback* for teachers to improve their teaching and for students to improve their learning. Formative assessments help teachers and students to identify strengths and weaknesses and content/skill areas that require extra and/or remedial work; they help both teachers and students to address and remediate problems *immediately* and help teachers identify students in need of extra support. Formative assessments generally occur during classroom teaching and include, *inter alia,* student answers to focussed teacher questions, teacher diagnosis of learning errors and remediation on the same day or soon after and submitted student work. In contrast to summative assessments, formative assessments rarely carry high stakes for the student or teacher. Formative assessments are designed to assess learning progress and provide information to teachers and students that enable teachers to diagnose and resolve learning difficulties in the immediate or short term. In principle, formative assessments can be carried out on a daily and weekly basis in classrooms by teachers and students. Students are encouraged to engage in self-assessment as part of this process. The information generated by a formative assessment of a student should go no further than the classroom. Formative assessments are not intended to be used in order to rank order/grade students, schools, divisions, zones or provinces. They are intended to improve learning in a timely manner.

The key difference between formative and summative assessment is the *use made* of the information generated by the assessment. *Formative assessment is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by teachers and their students to decide how much learners have learned, where they need to go and how best to get there.* Where summative assessmentsare typically used to make one-off judgements of learning levels achieved and are often used to *select* and stream students into future education provision (e.g. the Grade 5 scholarship exam in Sri Lanka) formative assessment provides teacher *and* learner with information about performance on learning tasks that is available immediately and can be used to modify the next steps of teaching and learning. *Inter alia,* formative assessment is part of effective planning for teaching and learning, is central to classroom practice, focuses on the task and the steps needed to perform the task well, not simply ‘getting right answers’. Formative assessmentrefers to activities that teachers and students undertake to gain information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning. These may include teacher observation, classroom discussion, and analysis of student work, including homework and tests.

Assessment becomes formative when the information generated is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs (Boston, 2002, Black and Wiliam, 1998). While summative assessments are intended to *prove learning*, formative assessments are intended to be used to *improve learning*. Another way of expressing this is: summative assessments are assessments *of* learning; formative assessments are assessments *for* learning.

In some countries the principles and practices of formative assessment have been developed extensively and have found their way into education policy. For example the Assessment Reform Group in England and Wales has produced a set of ten principles of formative assessment, otherwise known as Assessment *for* Learning (as distinct from assessment *of* learning) (se Annex 1 for further elaboration). In Sri Lanka, awareness of the potential of the practices of formative assessment to improve learning is less developed, one indication of which is the difficulty we have found in translating the term ‘formative assessment’ from English into Tamil and Sinhala in ways that that reflect its intended meaning[[1]](#footnote-1).

***Summative and formative assessments of schools: School Quality Assurance***

As noted above Summative and Formative Assessments can also be made, in principle, of schools rather than individual students. The School Quality Assurance programme employs the principles of summative and formative assessment.

A notable feature of the School Quality Assurance framework (issued by the Ministry of Education, December 2014 entitled ‘Our School: How good is it?’) is its focus on factors that impact on students’ learning experiences in classrooms. It is designed to engage teachers in the identification of what the school does well and where there are aspects for improvement. Schools are invited to undertake an internal self evaluation, while an external team conducts an external evaluation (in the case of secondary schools the team is sourced from the Zone; in the case of primary schools from the Division). Formative Assessment is undertaken through such discussions among teachers, and between teachers and the external teams to establish what changes might be made to deliver a better educational experience for students. The Quality Assurance framework delivers a summative judgement on different dimensions and on the overall performance of the school using a six point scale, ranging from ‘Excellent’ to ‘Immediate development required’. This summative assessment can also (in principle) be used formatively by the school staff to identify shortcomings that require to be addressed in the next year’s School development/improvement plan and supported by focused school based teacher development (SBTD). Officers in the Ministry, provincial and zonal education departments can also use the results of the Quality Assurance framework arising from all schools in a formative way.

The summative assessments can also be used by Zonal officers to compare the overall performance of individual schools. But the same Zonal officers can also use this comparison in order to identify schools that require additional support. In all of this, Quality Assurance outcomes must never be seen as something to be used to threaten a school but rather to support it get better, just as poor marks achieved by a student are a clear signal to a teacher that the student needs support. Accordingly, it is not just in classrooms that formative assessment can have a very positive impact on what students experience but educators and Ministry, provincial and zonal officers can also make very good use of this process to bring about improvement in schools as a whole.

***Summative and Formative Assessment of the Sri Lankan education system***

In principle summative and formative assessments can also be made of the performance of the quality of the whole system of education. National assessment surveys are often employed to monitor the performance of a system over time. The purpose of the Sri Lankan National Assessments of Learning Outcomes (NALO) among nationally representative samples of Grade 4 and 8 students is the monitoring of the performance of the system as a whole. Though based on a sample of individual student performance the assessments are used to demonstrate how well the system is performing *over time.* The results are not used to select students for further education or occupations. It is the system that is being assessed, not individual students. To date the analyses of NALO results have focussed on demonstrating variations in summative performance by province, gender, school type, medium of instruction. Currently, there is little evidence that the results of these surveys have been used formatively. In principle they could be.

***Using summative assessment for formative purposes***

In many instances the assessment tool required for a summative assessment and that required for formative assessment are different. For example a teacher needs to know whether children understand the concept of number rather than the numbers themselves. For this she does not need to conduct a 20 item test for all children in the class. Rather she may ask a small group of children to undertake an activity that in turn embeds an assessment task and provides an immediate opportunity for practice, remediation and reinforcement. For example the teacher may ask one child to select six objects from a pile of objects and/or to give six objects (e.g. bottletops) to another student. She may ask another to select eight etc. This can be repeated until all students have achieved mastery of the concept of numbers from 1-10. Some students will achieve mastery quickly. They can move on to larger numbers, while others may need to return to the concept of 2 and 3.

In principle, however, information from summative assessments can also be used formatively. The information has a dual purpose, as for example,

when teachers and/or students use it to diagnose learning problems and guide their efforts and activities in the classroom

when principals use it to guide their academic leadership of teachers

when principals and teachers use it to raise the performance of the school as a whole

when teacher educators use it to guide reforms in teacher education curricula, in service training and supervision of teaching practice

when curriculum developers use it to modify syllabi, curriculum materials and teacher guides

when planners and managers use it to target resources on low performing students and schools

The following section outlines innovative work underway in Sri Lanka that captures the spirit of formative assessment and which could be developed further in the future.

*Students*

MOE’s current developmental work on multilevel teaching and the identification of students with learning difficulties and the recent publication of the ‘Inclusive Education Tool Kit’ are raising awareness of the need for differentiated approaches to teaching and learning. Differentiated approaches to teaching and learning, designed to meet the education needs of all students rely on continuous formative assessments of learning. The implementation of these approaches relies on teachers’ understanding of the practices of formative assessment, the ability to conduct diagnostic assessments and the identification of teaching and learning activities that correspond to the student’s level of learning. As the piloting of various approaches is being carried out, it is important to assess how the initiatives relate to each other and how they can all be incorporated into a comprehensive methodology promoting formative assessment, differentiated teaching and learning and inclusive education. Such an approach will be effective not only for children with special educational needs but also the average students and gifted learners.

Information from summative end-of term and end-of-school year tests can also, in principle, be used formatively in order to improve teaching and learning. On the one hand it can be used to provide information to the student and his/her parent about learning outcomes. On the other it can be used formatively by teachers, as they seek to understand why particular students commit errors in their learning and can influence his/her teaching during the following term. In the case of end-of-year assessments, a detailed analysis of student performance of the test paper could be used more frequently than is done at present to inform the teacher of the entrants to the next class of areas of weakness of incoming students.

*Schools*

As already outlined above, the School Quality Assurance system combines the principles of summative and formative assessment. In the coming years the use of summative assessments by school principals and teachers for formative improvements of school and classroom practices could become a major focus of attention.

*System*

The information generated from the NALO surveys can, in principle, be used *formatively* by policymakers and planners to target resources, improve teacher education and curriculum materials. However more strenuous efforts need to be made to make use of these summative assessments for formative purposes.

By identifying disparities in learning between provinces and social groups (e.g. by gender, medium, school type, urban/rural) policymakers and planners could, in future, implement targeted strategies designed to reduce disparities. By identifying the items with which students experience difficulty curriculum developers, textbook writers and teacher educators could, in future, work to revise their guidance to teachers and students.

The NALO reports contain a wealth of information that could be exploited more in the future. For example the results set out in the reports could be used to

* provide greater resources to weaker provinces and geographical regions;
* identify areas that need more teacher training;
* increase the supply of relevant teaching-learning material to schools, and classrooms;
* improve the quality of textbooks and teaching-learning material;
* improve the design of the new curriculum and associated syllabi (Aide Memoire Oct 2014).

*From public examinations to improving teaching and learning*

Similarly, the information generated by public examination summative assessments (the GCE O/L and GCE A/L) can be utilized formatively to strengthen education quality in the system as a whole. In principle analysis (e.g. item response analysis) and dissemination of findings will promote awareness and improved understanding among curriculum developers, textbook writers, in-service advisors, principals, teachers and students, of the expected standards and the learning issues faced by students.

*Province Subsystems*

Some provinces have been designing their own assessment feedback systems. Through completing a student Grade 5 mathematics test themselves and analysing their own performance as well as that of students in local schools, provincial, zonal, divisional staff and teachers review the purposes of formative and summative assessment, identify common errors, learn to diagnose the sources of error and to design learning/teaching activities to resolve errors. The programme is intended to build capacity in the provinces among teachers, teacher educators and education managers to improve learning through the formative use of summative assessment.

This work could be used in the future to feed into new curriculum and assessment programmes envisaged under the Education Reforms. It could also be used to shape national curriculum revision and the content of teacher education curricula in the future.

**Education Reforms: towards the future**

A number of education reforms have been under discussion in recent times, among which are a greater use of formative assessment in schools, modifications to the G5 scholarship examination and school rationalisation. I offer here a few observations on these particular reforms, based on the above discussion about assessment.

A whole system approach is required to assess the viability of assessment reforms.

1. On formative assessment. Many conflate the meaning of continuous assessment and formative assessment. While formative assessments may be continuous, not all continuous assessments are formative. Many continuous assessments are best characterised as simply continuous summative assessments. The key characteristic of formative assessment is its use by teachers in adapting teaching and learning to meet student needs.
2. Reforms of the G5 scholarship exam. Recent research (Abayasekara, 2019) indicates that the current exam does not ensure that its main target group – talented and poor students - make full use of available opportunities for education, rendering its goals unattainable. Popular schools have very limited spaces for those from less popular schools, mainly because Grade 6 spaces are already filled by those who entered at Grade 1 and who are not required to reach the same cut-off scores as potential entrants from among scholarship holders. More than 70 years have elapsed since the Grade 5 exam was introduced to provide financial assistance to high achieving students who secured entrance to good quality secondary education, access to which was rather limited at that time. Nowadays, the vast majority of Sri Lankan students have access to Grade 11 level education in most subjects (i.e. comprehensive education). Countries where access to comprehensive secondary education has been universalized have long since abolished selection examinations at the end of the primary education. An exception is Singapore where an end of primary selection test is used to stream students into academic and vocational education (albeit at an older age). In Sri Lanka selection into different subject streams does not occur until much later i.e. from Grade 11 to 12.

The Grade 5 exam appears to have outlived its purpose and usefulness. The more fundamental issue and the one in need of urgent and sustained attention is a rationalization of the number of schools that offer secondary education, a leveling up of all those rationalised secondary schools to the standard (and title) of national schools (qualifications/experience of teachers, infrastructure, equipment etc) and the placement of all secondary schools under the same management, either provincial or national. This, combined with the separation of all primary sections/schools from the secondary grades (both national and provincial) and the formation of school clusters in which groups of primary schools ‘feed into’ secondary schools, should reduce the need for the Grade 5 examination in the longer term. While the exam may need to continue (but perhaps on a voluntary basis) for a few years to come, there should be a target for its abolition in a few years time (rather than endless tinkering with its composition), combined with a commitment to upgrade secondary schools.

1. The Grade 5 exam holds out hope to poor students for their future and in the interests of equity this needs to be acknowledged and addressed. However, access to a popular secondary school is only an intermediate aim – the longer term aim is to enter university. There has been some discussion that the district quotas in current use for university admission be replaced by school quotas. Might this offer one means of supporting students from poorer families attending disadvantaged schools? If admission quotas were linked with school rather than district quotas then children who do well in poorer performing secondary schools could gain some advantage in university entry (with additional pre-university courses made available to reduce marked achievement differences between students at the beginning of university education).

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**Annex 1 Ten Principles of Assessment for Learning (Formative Assessment)**

Assessment for learning is a rather new concept in Sri Lanka. Elsewhere it has become an accepted part of the everyday practices of teachers. In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for example, ten principles for Assessment for Learning (based on work by the Assessment Reform Group in 2002) have been incorporated into classroom assessment policy.

**The ten principles of Assessment for Learning**

1. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD BE PART OF THE EFFECTIVE PLANNING OF TEACHING AND LEARNING A teacher’s planning should provide opportunities for both learner and teacher to obtain and use information about progress towards learning goals. It also has to be ﬂexible to respond to initial and emerging ideas and skills. Planning should include strategies to ensure that learners understand the goals they are pursuing, why they are pursuing them and the criteria that could be applied in assessing their work against these. How learners will receive feedback, how they will take part in assessing their learning and how they will be helped to make further progress should also be planned, ideally in negotiation with the pupils themselves.
2. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD FOCUS ON HOW PUPILS LEARN The process of learning has to be in the minds of both learner and teacher when assessment is planned and when the evidence is interpreted. Learners should become as aware of the ‘how’ of their learning as they are of the ‘what’.
3. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD BE RECOGNISED AS CENTRAL TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE Much of what teachers and learners do in classrooms can be described as assessment. That is, tasks and questions prompt learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills; what learners say and do is then observed and interpreted, and judgements are made about how learning can progress. These assessment processes are an essential part of everyday classroom practice and involve both teachers and learners in reﬂection, dialogue and decision making. These definitions of assessment expand its meaning beyond tests to include all forms of inquiry into the learner’s progress.
4. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD BE REGARDED AS A KEY PROFESSIONAL SKILL. Teachers require the professional knowledge and skills to: plan for assessment; observe learning; analyse and interpret evidence of learning; give feedback to learners; and support learners in self-assessment. Teachers should be supported in developing these skills through initial and continuing professional development. Continuing professional development can be most effective when it is continuous, integrated into the school’s agenda and collaborative. Sri Lanka’s recently introduced school-based teacher development (SBTD) programmes provide an opportunity for this type of collaboration.
5. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNER MOTIVATION Assessment that encourages learning fosters motivation by emphasising progress and achievement rather than failure. Comparison with others who have been more successful is unlikely to motivate learners. It can also lead to their withdrawing from the learning process in areas where they have been made to feel they are ‘no good’. Motivation can be preserved and enhanced by assessment methods that protect the learner’s autonomy, provide some choice and constructive feedback, and create opportunity for self-direction.
6. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD PROMOTE COMMITMENT TO LEARNING GOALS AND A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE CRITERIA BY WHICH THEY ARE ASSESSED For effective learning to take place, learners need to understand what it is they are trying to achieve and why they are trying to achieve it – and they must also want to achieve it. Understanding and commitment follows when learners have some part in deciding goals and identifying criteria for assessing progress. Communicating assessment criteria involves discussing their importance and meaning with learners, using terms that they can understand, providing examples of how the criteria can be met in practice and engaging learners in peer and self-assessment.

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1. LEARNERS SHOULD RECEIVE CONSTRUCTIVE GUIDANCE ABOUT HOW TO PROGRESS. Learners need support in order to plan the next phases of their learning. Teachers should: pinpoint the learner’s strengths and advise on how to develop them; be clear and constructive about weaknesses and how they might be addressed and provide opportunities for learners to apply suggested improvement to their work.
2. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING DEVELOPS LEARNERS’ CAPACITY FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT SO THAT THEY CAN BECOME REFLECTIVE AND SELF-MANAGING. Reflective and self-managing (or self-directed) learners seek out and cultivate new skills, new knowledge and new understandings. They are able to engage in self-reflection and to identify how to progress in their learning. Teachers should support learners to take charge of their learning through developing the skills of reflection and self assessment and in allowing pupils to take their own initiatives for progressing learning at times.

9. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD RECOGNISE THE FULL RANGE OF ACHIEVEMENTS OF ALL LEARNERS. It should be used to enhance all learners’ opportunities to learn in all areas of educational activity. It should enable all learners to achieve their best and to have their efforts recognised.

10. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING SHOULD BE SENSITIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE BECAUSE ANY ASSESSMENT HAS AN EMOTIONAL IMPACT. Teachers should be aware of the impact that comments, marks and grades can have on learners’ confidence and enthusiasm and should be as constructive as possible in the feedback they give. Comments that focus on the work rather than the person are more constructive for both learning and motivation. A student who is distracted by negative – or even positive- personal comments is less likely to be focussing on learning.

**Sources:** Assessment Reform Group (2002), Hargreaves and Gipps (2013)

1. World Bank consultants discussions with officers, ISAs and Teacher in the province-based Primary Education workshop programme (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)