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Assessing the Humanities in the Primary School Using a Portfolio-based Approach

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ABSTRACT This article suggests that a portfolio-based approach to assessing the humanities in the primary school is appropriate and outlines what this might involve. It argues for a broad interpretation of 'the humanities' and for adopting principles associated with formative assessment, where assessment is not equated with testing and a wide range of children's achievements are celebrated.

Introduction

This article suggests that a portfolio-based approach is the most appropriate way of assessing and celebrating young children's achievements in the humanities – and by implication other aspects of the curriculum where testing is a crude and inappropriate method of assessment. The next section briefly explores how 'the humanities' should be understood in relation to young children and the challenges in assessing such areas of learning. Key principles which enable assessment to enhance young children's learning and motivation are then identified. This leads into a consideration of the benefits and practical difficulties of using a portfolio-based approach in assessing the humanities with young children. The conclusion summarises the main points of the argument. While the article draws on the context in England, the argument is applicable more widely.

The Humanities in the Primary School and Challenges in Assessing Them

While 'the humanities' are often equated with history, geography and religious education, at least in England, other countries, including Northern Ireland,

Scotland and Wales, organise the primary curriculum based on broader areas of learning. In Eaude (2017), I discuss what should be included within 'the humanities' in the primary school, arguing for this to be seen in terms of what enables children to understand themselves, other people and the culture(s) in which people live. As such, the humanities are closely linked with spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and are concerned with what it means to be human and with enabling children to become active, thoughtful and compassionate citizens. Such a view suggests that 'the humanities' should be interpreted broadly, crossing disciplinary/subject boundaries, including aspects such as literature, drama and philosophy, and involving much more than learning factual information.

In the current policy climate, such areas of learning have been increasingly marginalised and not included in formal assessment processes. One may, reasonably, think that it is best not to assess such areas of learning if this entails regular testing. However, assessment should not be equated with testing. The current emphasis on testing is based on the questionable assumption that all types of learning can be measured, or graded, with enough validity and reliability to make such tests worthwhile or meaningful. Tests usually assess propositional knowledge and outcomes, whereas much of the knowledge associated with the humanities is procedural and personal/interpersonal: broadly speaking, ways of working and attitudes, values and dispositions. Testing areas of learning such as the humanities and the arts has limited validity and there is a danger that testing, especially if it is 'high stakes', will constrict children's imagination and creativity, lead to demotivation and add to children's stress and teacher workload. However, such challenges do not mean that one should not assess children's learning in the humanities, as not to do so would devalue their importance and further marginalise them. Instead, more appropriate and humane methods of assessment are needed, based on applying key principles in formative assessment.

Key Principles in Using Assessment to Enhance Young Children's Learning and Motivation

This section identifies from existing research some key principles of assessment which help to enhance young children's learning and motivation.

The first principle is that assessment must be aligned with aims. One should assess what one values (and vice versa). Therefore, if one values the 'whole child', one should assess, but not test, the whole child. This implies finding suitable ways of assessing skills, understanding and qualities, rather than only propositional knowledge, and of assessing cross-curricular learning meaningfully, especially in areas of learning which straddle disciplinary boundaries.

A second principle is that assessment should be formative, in the sense that assessment should help to guide, and enhance, future learning, rather than just assessing what children have learned. The widely used distinction between

summative and formative assessment is of limited use in this context, as summative assessment – assessment of what children know at the end of a period of time, module or topic – can be used formatively. Black and Wiliam (1998, pp. 7-8), recognising that formative assessment does not have a tightly defined and widely accepted definition, suggest that it encompasses 'all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged'.

Torrance and Pryor's (1998) distinction between divergent and convergent assessment (see Olovsson, 2015, pp. 742-743) is more helpful. Put simply, the former seeks to establish what children can do, over time, and the latter whether children have learned what the teacher or the curriculum demands. Where possible, the assessment of young children should include divergent elements, to establish, and build on, what they know and can achieve. One should try to assess process as well as outcome and different types of knowledge, rather than just propositional knowledge. If assessment is to be integrated with learning, assessment must, as far as possible, not be separate from teaching and should be contextualised, if children are to understand the task and what is required, whereas tests are normally decontextualised, sometimes deliberately so, as with the phonics screening test in Year 1 in England. For instance, to assess skills and qualities such as teamwork and persistence, assessment mechanisms must include opportunities to demonstrate these in practice.

To be valid and reliable, which is a significant challenge when assessing young children, assessment should be based on several perspectives, especially when assessing complex areas of learning where a single perspective may be inaccurate. This implies, with young children, using a range of means of assessment, over time, with judgements which are collaborative, based on contributions and insights from a range of adults who know the child in different settings, including parents/carers and support staff. To help enhance children's future learning and motivation, assessment should highlight children's past achievements, identify next steps and involve the children. So, assessment should, as far as possible, be child-led to create and sustain a sense of children's voice (see Robinson, 2014) and agency; and encourage them to be proud of what they have achieved. In other words, children should have a say in what is assessed, and how, and believe that assessment is worthwhile in that it helps to enhance their learning. For instance, self- or peer-assessment can help children to understand what good work looks like, identify the strengths and shortcomings of a piece of work and know how to improve.

When work is assessed using both grades (or scores) and comments, those receiving such feedback tend to take more notice of the former than of comments. This provides a strong argument for adults making spoken or written comments, rather than using scores or grades, if children are to know how to improve. Moreover, assessment should not involve grading or measurement of what cannot sensibly be graded or measured, especially where

doing so has perverse consequences. For example, trying to measure an individual's ability to work in a team may easily skew how individuals act in a collaborative task to try and gain a high mark.

Assessment must not cause distress to the child if one is to establish accurately what s/he knows and can do. Means of assessment must be manageable for both children and adults, and not take up too much time, without becoming so simple that the results become meaningless. What is manageable will depend to some extent on the age of the children, and their ability to organise themselves, but also on the expectations that adults establish and the guidance they provide.

The next section considers how these principles can be applied to assessment in the humanities, arguing for a portfolio-based approach.

The Practicalities, Benefits and Challenges of Adopting a Portfolio-based Approach

By a portfolio, I mean a collection of work of different types, gathered over time, and so cumulative and contextualised, and usually involving work in progress and finished work of different types. This may include plans, mindmaps, notes, finished work and reflections, involving written work and drawings, and where possible photographs, audio recordings and video footage – for instance, of artefacts, presentations or performances. Ideally, a portfolio should:

- record work or celebrate achievements in and out of school – for instance, with descriptions of activities and certificates;
- show what the child can do both individually and in a group; and
- be largely child-led, but also containing comments from adults, including teachers, support staff, parents/carers and others.

By adopting a divergent approach, where what is included is not just what the curriculum demands, portfolios have the potential to provide evidence of achievements over time and to enhance young children's learning and motivation, by helping children to reflect on previous successes and possible next steps and becoming a source of pride for children and other people.

Portfolios may be related to a specific area of learning, module or period of time, though my preference is to include a wide range of items, except where there is a strong reason to do otherwise. Portfolios can help in recording elements of process and output and in assessing a range of skills and qualities, including, but not restricted to, those associated with subjects usually linked with the humanities. Depending on what is included, a portfolio of work associated with the humanities can not only help in assessing content in subjects such as history, geography and religious education – and in demonstrating what children have covered and their progress – it can also provide evidence of children's ability in writing, drawing, talking and problem-solving, and of their ability to organise and work in a group. Moreover, such an approach helps to

value children's existing 'funds of knowledge', including those not traditionally associated with school learning and often not regarded as important in schools (see Gonzales et al, 2005).

There is no one way of collecting and organising a portfolio. Children will need guidance on what to include, especially those who are not used to such an approach. Thus, teachers may expect children to include specific pieces of work, at least as a minimum, to provide evidence of what they have done in relation to specific curriculum subjects or topics taught. However, children should be able, and encouraged, to add what they believe to be appropriate, within limits, if they are to retain ownership of the portfolio. When well established, a portfolio-based approach can help to reduce, to some extent, the workload associated with marking.

One difficult challenge is how to ensure that work does not get lost or damaged. This is largely an organisational matter. Making books helps to provide a coherence to a topic or module but can be time-consuming. While work may be stuck into books, or stored in plastic wallets, this has two limitations. First, it may restrict the nature of the work which is included to writing and drawings of a certain size. Second, speaking from my experience as a teacher, endless bits of paper may easily get lost or damaged. The use of information technology would seem to make it easier to store a wider range of written work or drawing and to include scanned documents, photographs and recordings in ways that are not possible in traditional portfolios.

Adding regularly to the portfolio must be taken seriously by children and adults. To ensure this, my view is that children should be expected to add to the portfolio at least every week or maybe fortnight – and out of school as appropriate – and also with adults adding to it regularly, with this depending on the age of the child and the type of work undertaken.

It may reasonably be argued that a portfolio-based approach is easier for older primary-aged children (from about seven years old upwards) to manage than it is for younger ones, largely because older children tend to be more capable of organising material. While this is so, most young children should be capable of organising material, initially with support, and then with increasing independence.

Conclusion

This article has challenged the often implicit conflation of assessment with testing and argued against trying to measure what cannot be measured reliably, validly or meaningfully without adverse consequences. Placing children's agency and voice at the heart of assessment helps to engage and motivate children by promoting pride in their achievements across a wide range of areas of learning, both in and out of school. Such an approach has the potential to give children more responsibility for, and control of, assessment and to reduce teacher workload. A portfolio-based approach helps integrate assessment and learning, especially by helping to show how skills and understanding have been

applied in particular contexts, providing evidence of process and outcome over time and enhancing children's learning by encouraging reflection on previous work and consideration of 'next steps'. This can be as part of one large portfolio or as separate ones for different topics or areas of learning. As such, it seems to be the most appropriate way of assessing the humanities, whether this term is understood in terms of subjects such as history, geography and religious education, or more broadly. A similar approach can be adapted for the arts and other aspects of the curriculum such as children's talk, where tests are likely not to be valid, reliable or meaningful.

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