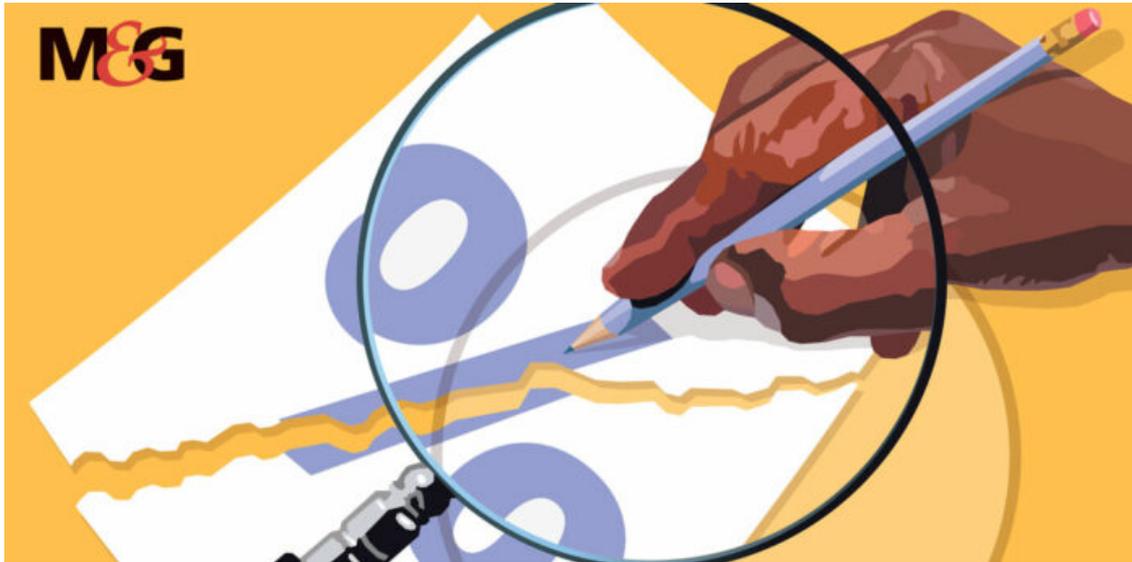


EDUCATION

Folly of school assessment in a pandemic

Joanne Hardman 13 Sep 2020



(Graphic: John McCann/M&G)

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COMMENT

Schools have opened with the expressed hope of catching up on core concepts informed by a trimmed curriculum, amid ongoing Covid-19 challenges to mental and physical health.

On August 31 I received an email from the Covid Education Crisis Committee asking for my signature on their petition to, among other things, ensure that: “All learners from grades 1 to 11 must be promoted to the next grade, and programmes to catch up lost learning time in 2020 must be put in place.”

This was no doubt in reaction to the government’s assertion that: “We want to clarify that there will not be a ‘pass one, pass all’ approach when it comes to the completion of the academic year under the circumstances brought to us by Covid-19.

“The department is going to work hard to ensure that learners are assessed on the basis of the work they have done. We expect each and every learner to participate in learning.

“If you are at home the parent or caregiver will have the responsibility of ensuring that the child is learning and that there is evidence of the work that the child is doing so that we are able to conduct an assessment at the end of the year to issue a report accordingly,” said Elijah Mhlanga, the department of basic education spokesperson.

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What caught my eye was the word “assessment”; the government wants to assess children who have, by and large, lost almost six months of schooling.

The problem is not what is assessed but rather how this is done in the current context. Another problem is the department is expecting parents and caregivers to ensure that children are up to date with schoolwork that has been done at home over the past six months. Add to this the fact that children’s levels of anxiety have been reported as growing.

Developmental assessment

Assessment is inextricably linked to learning; one cannot teach and learn without some form of assessment. Good assessment is part of a pedagogy that aims to develop children cognitively.

There are two broad kinds of assessment: summative and formative assessments. Summative assessment tests what knowledge a child has acquired, while formative assessment builds guidance into the assessment process and tests the child’s potential to learn.

The summative assessment doesn’t test a child’s potential to learn and has little pedagogical benefit outside of illustrating what the child knows and what the child needs to know. The summative assessment is a good tool to use before you begin teaching. It is a means of testing a child’s performance, but not their competence to perform.

At best it tells the teacher what a child knows, at worst it tests recall as opposed to understanding. Add to this that teachers will often teach just to the test.

A summative assessment on its own seems to be a problematic guide for grade progression.

It is this kind of assessment that children are now doing in school. If we add to this the months of schooling lost in the pandemic, then we need to ask ourselves why we would use a summative assessment in 2020 to determine grade progression.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, only 25% of children at school in developing countries (such as South Africa) have had access to home schooling with online materials.

The department addressed this issue a few months into the Covid lockdown by letting children collect hard copies of their books and tasks to be completed at home.

This is where Mhlanga’s comment about parents and caregivers having the responsibility to “ensure that the child is learning” comes in.

More than three million people have lost jobs during the pandemic, two million of whom are women, generally the primary caregivers. This could lead to mental health issues such as anxiety

and depression, which mitigate against the ability to function optimally and, consequently, to teach their children. Parents who have kept their jobs have limited time after work to assist their children with their schoolwork.

Moreover, the assumption that any parent or caregiver can be a teacher fails to appreciate the complexity of the teaching profession.

So, what is it that will be tested in the summative, formal assessments? If only 25% of children have adequate access to home schooling and online teaching, we are creating a further divide between the privileged and the underprivileged. Those who have had the privilege of online teaching from qualified teachers will be more prepared to succeed in an assessment than a child who has not had this assistance.

The formative assessment

We need to look at the second form of assessment, formative assessment, to understand how best to assess children for grade progression.

Formative assessment requires that the teacher assist, or build assistance into, the test. It requires ongoing feedback and iterative cycles of refining the work. This kind of assessment tests for competence and potential. What a child can do with assistance is indicative of their potential to learn.

Pedagogically, formative assessment enables a child to develop cognitively. They can see their mistakes and rectify them with guidance. If the department is intent on assessing children this year, it is this kind of assessment that we need to be looking at in 2020 during a pandemic.

A school project incorporating core competencies outlined in the trimmed curriculum would appear to be a good way to assess children on the knowledge they will gain in the third and fourth. I cannot see how it is possible to assess any of the work done while schools were closed in any manner that will be fair and not lead to a furthering of the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged.

Finally, many students will have lost family members in the pandemic; some have even lost their primary caregivers. With three million people added to the unemployed during this time and government Covid relief amounting to R350 a month, we can also be certain that children are attending school hungry. I wonder what kind of empathic context we feel we are providing when they are required to write formal, summative assessments almost immediately on return to school? Is this how we care for our children's mental and physical wellbeing?

Let us assess schoolchildren, but, let us do so in a formative, empathic manner.

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