

Making a Difference 1

School Improvement: How do we know it? How do we show it? Part 1 - Lester Flockton

"We must learn to measure what we value rather than value what we can measure." (Education Counts, 1991) If only everything were neat and tidy, linear and straight, black and white, simple and uncomplicated. But that's not what it's like in the majority of schools and classrooms, let alone the homes that children live in.

Whether measuring student achievement or school performance, we need to accept that for the most part, what can be easily or conveniently measured, quantified and recorded with a strong degree of confidence in the integrity of the data, is not necessarily what counts most.

Hargreaves (1984) suggests that there are at least four aspects of achievement that school needs to develop:

Dealing with the capacity to remember and use facts. This aspect concerns the type of achievement that public examinations tend to measure. It emphasises a pupil's ability to memorise and reproduce knowledge often in a written form.

Practical and spoken skills. This aspect concerns the practical capacity to apply knowledge with an emphasis on problem-solving and investigational skills.

Personal and social skills. The focus here is on a pupil's capacity to communicate with and relate to others. It also concerns personal characteristics such as initiative, self-reliance and leadership potential.

Motivation and self-confidence. This concerns a pupil's self-image and ability, for example, to persevere in the face of failure.

This isn't a bad list for starters, and I'm sure that individual schools are quite capable of building their own lists. The message in Hargreave's list, however, is that it would be "reductionist" to suggest that achievement for success in life can be narrowly defined. And since many schools espouse the virtuous goal of educating students for life, they are committing themselves to a rich and balanced view of "achievement". Thus it would be inconsistent and misleading for such schools to reduce their parameters of achievement to the conveniently measurable, and particularly to data from a few occasional standardised tests.

This, of course, presents a huge challenge for developing and strengthening the quality and integrity of professional judgements as opposed to judgements derived from externally controlled tests. Standardised tests have a place, but it's a small one. It's odd, therefore, that tests such as PAT have figured so prominently in the data used and reported by many schools. I think time is overdue for users of such tests to revisit the very sound advice given by Neil Reid in the PAT Manual. Under the heading "Interpreting the Test Results" he says it is important for test users to realise that NO test score is perfectly accurate. Tests are primarily a sample of behaviour and thus a single test of the kind commonly used in our schools can examine only a fraction of the knowledge and understanding, skill and competencies of a student. It is important, therefore, that test scores be regarded merely estimates of a student's ability which are subject to errors of measurement. The results derived for an individual student from a single group test of achievement should not be regarded as final or sacrosanct.