We don't do SATS, we don't have exams, we don't have league tables; so how do we know that the children are learning?

Testing is widely regarded as 'the way we know that children are learning', but on the basis of the 'Observer effect' - that the act of observing changes that which is observed - is it really possible to devise a test that will show us how and what children are learning without interfering with it?

How does testing work? It seems simple: you teach the children something and then you give them a test - usually written - to find out if they have learned it. For things like spelling or times tables, this works fairly well, but the range of skills, knowledge and understanding that can be tested successfully in this way is very limited, and if we apply it to the whole of a child's education, it quickly begins to affect what and how we teach.

First, we have to decide what we teach them. Who should decide that? What are the criteria for deciding what to teach and what to leave out? Should teachers decide for themselves or is it useful to have a society made up of people who all know the same things and have the same gaps in their knowledge? What do we mean by 'useful'? How often should we change what we teach - does knowledge become obsolete? Do we need to be objective about what we teach or are we actively trying to cultivate certain attitudes? If politicians are making these decisions, it would be foolish to imagine that they are not politically, rather than educationally, motivated. How do we know if what we're teaching the children is true? The most acrimonious and protracted debate in the writing of the National Curriculum has been about this last question in relation to history teaching. It has been going on since the 1970s.

So we'll put aside the question of who decides for the moment and move on. The next one is: *how* do we teach? Research findings are published constantly about how children learn. Research usually takes ten years to affect government policy, but hundreds of different educational methods exist, based on thousands of papers promoting often conflicting theories; conflicting because, as soon as you begin to investigate how children learn, you realise that not everyone agrees on what 'learning' is: is it remembering? Understanding? Does it include interpreting? Extrapolating? Extending? Imagining? Being able to *do* something - a skill? Different theories present different definitions. If what we teach has to be tested, then what the children are learning must be observable and measurable, so that affects the way we teach, because whichever method we choose has to produce evidence of learning.

Assuming you accept one of the many definitions of what learning is, how do you test those things? If a child can't write the answer to a question, does that mean he doesn't know it? If she can't explain something in words, does that mean she doesn't understand it? If you ask him to develop a thought and he can't do it instantly but comes back with a good answer the next day, does that mean he's not as clever as the child who can give an answer on the spot? Is it useful to test cleverness?

So then we have to take a step back and ask, what do we want to test? We may think we know what learning is, but do we want to test everything the children learn? Is that even possible? This question usually reveals the fact that what we can test depends on how we test it. Not everything can be tested through a written exam, for example; there are also

many intangible things that we want our children to learn and develop, and which are an essential part of their education, but which are not empirically testable at all - imagination, compassion, responsibility, honesty; in an educational culture based on testing and its results, these things have no value and can be easily disregarded.

So the people who set the tests … but who should set the tests? In the UK, examining bodies that set GCSEs and A-Levels are private companies. They set the syllabus for the course leading to each exam and then sell books containing all the information teachers need to know in order to teach it. This answers the question 'should different schools - teachers - be able to teach different things?' If they do, the exam system becomes impossible to manage, so it's better if everyone teaches the same things; better for the examining boards, that is, not better for the children.

Then the exam boards employ thousands of teachers to mark the students' work, based on fixed criteria supplied by the board. The evidence for the fulfilment of these criteria has to be clear and simple, so that all markers mark in the same way and the marking is fair. Does this produce the best result for the children? Free market economics would say that putting testing into the hands of private companies creates competition and the companies offering the best product will prevail, to everyone's benefit. More questions … how do we decide what is the 'best product' in the context of testing children? 'Best' can quickly become 'easiest to implement', most popular, or 'the one with the most appealing advertising campaign'.

Back to the marking. Another question comes up: when we test them, are we measuring the children against one another? Exam boards certainly do, but why? How does this help them? Are we testing them in order to help them? If not, who are the tests for? If they're for universities and employers, are the things we test really the things that show who will be good students or employees? Ranking requires that we set standards, and standards are then considered 'normal'; the child who reaches the standard, tested in the way decided, is 'normal', and the child who doesn't, isn't; the child who reaches a high standard in the test is exceptional. Everyone wants to be exceptional, so the exam boards that have the most 'exceptional' results become the most popular, exceptional becomes normal, everyone gets A* and those who don't have failed. What happens to a child who is made aware at age 6 that s/he isn't normal? What happens to a child who is given licence to think 'I'm exceptional and he's a failure. I must be better than him', the inevitable extension of that being 'I'm the best in the class, so I'm better than everyone else. I'm special.'

The idea of introducing elements that encourage children to think about themselves and other people in this way is anathema to a school whose fundamental ethos stems from the fact that every human being is an individual with a purpose in life and a part to play in the world.

So, because one child may excel at writing, another at maths, another at drawing, another at drama, another at speaking - the list of things children excel at is very long - the people who set the tests should (shouldn't they?) devise them so that children can use this range of skills and talents to demonstrate what they have learned (rather than that they have learned what 'we' want them to have learned). Otherwise the children who excel at writing have an unfair advantage, and many brilliant children - minds, souls - with strengths that are not being tested are made to think that they are not good enough, with all the consequences that will have for them and for the society to which they will be expected to

make a contribution. But there are no tests for those other strengths, because it complicates the system, and it's easier if everyone is tested in the same way. Easier for the markers and the exam boards, and for the league tables, not better for the children.

What is the effect of all this on what the children experience in the classroom? Under pressure from their schools to ensure that the children achieve the best possible exam results, teachers often just teach what the children will need in order to do well in the tests. They know what children really need; they know about imagination, compassion, honesty etc., but the pressure is on to get them through the exams, because exam results have currency. Their jobs might be on the line if they don't. The children also feel the pressure and fall easily into believing that they must get the best possible grades and that their future depends on it. Parents also get swept along. Those who realise they won't 'make it' often just give up, because what's the point in trying if the best you can do is not good enough? We live in a 'first or worst' society, so the situation can be even more extreme; if you're not the *best*, you may as well give up. This leads to children who are paralysed by the fear of failure and who, consequently, lose interest in everything and fail to learn or develop anything. This is a very serious problem now.

Another consequence of this is that parents whose children do succeed in the system as it is put them into schools that select 'the best' pupils. This separates them from the rest of society and exacerbates the feeling that they're better than other people, simply because their particular strengths fit the system and therefore have a higher status than other people's.

So, if we don't test children, how do we know that they are learning anything? It's like asking 'If I don't measure the amount of air that goes into your lungs, how do I know you're breathing?' We can tell by what the children say, by conversations we have with them, the questions they ask, the work they do, how engaged they are in lessons, how enthusiastic they are, how well they can focus, the connections they make, the vocabulary they use, the ideas they have, how they move, the way they organise themselves, the way they interact with their friends and with adults - countless ways, far more effective than testing, and which embrace all children.

So what do children need from us in order to learn, develop and grow? They need to know that their teachers really know them and what they are capable of; that their strengths and passions are recognised and encouraged; they need to be challenged; they need to have their interest and enthusiasm engaged in what they are learning; they need to experience that learning is something adults do for its own sake, because it's fulfilling and enjoyable; they need to see that their teachers appreciate and respect each other; they need to become aware of what it feels like to work hard, to experience the joy that comes from it, and to recognise when they're not doing that; they need their teachers to notice when they are struggling and to support them in the right way; they need to know that struggling with things is normal - essential in fact; that it isn't shameful; that it's important and valuable to have the courage to try something at the risk of failing; that failing doesn't mean you are worthless.

The structure of our school enables all this to happen; we make our own curriculum and devise our own lesson plans, based on the children we have before us; we research new subjects and bring our enthusiasm for them into our lessons; we come together regularly to study and share our understanding of children; we visit each other's lessons and observe

the children at work with our colleagues; as Class Teachers, we accompany a particular group of children through many years of their lives and come to really know, understand and love them. And the children experience that.

All of this we do for the children throughout the school, providing reports for parents and feedback to children, always in an age-appropriate way. Then, as they come towards the end of that phase of their lives, we assess in a more formal way what they are able to do, partly in order to give them access to universities and colleges that expect them to have a piece of paper with some grades on it, but also to give them a more objective reflection of their strengths and weaknesses. We do this only after they reach the age of 16, when they can use that reflection consciously and take responsibility for their own continuing education.

The Certificate of Steiner Education is a form of certification that uses continuous assessment through a variety of different methods including practical work - making things - art portfolios, oral presentations, written work and formal essays, interviews and discussions. Most importantly, it leaves us free to teach whatever and however we decide is best for our students and to give each one of them the opportunity to show us what they can do, what they understand and how they think.

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