

Classroom assessment and education: challenging the assumptions of socialisation and instrumentality

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Classroom assessment and education: Challenging the assumptions of socialisation and instrumentality

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Abstract

The opportunity offered by the Umea Symposium to probe the intersection of quality and assessment immediately brings into focus a wider issue – that of the quality of education which assessment aspires to support. Prompted by recent research into formative assessment in Scottish primary school contexts, the paper explores how formative assessment has become associated with an overly benign understanding of learning which misrecognises the possibility of undesirable learning and does not seem to address the inherently political nature of education. Having illuminated the potential inequities of formative assessment practices, the paper then asks what role formative assessment might play to support an understanding of education that is not simply about the transmission of traditional social norms, but also aspires to illuminate their social construction and their political nature.

Keywords: formative assessment, assessment for learning, sociology of assessment, assessment and identity construction

Introduction

Although historically a relatively recent social phenomenon, educational assessment has become a wholly unexceptional, taken-for-granted practice within institutionalised mass education (Broadfoot 2000; Madaus and Horn 2000; Delandshere 2001). More generally, in Western thinking education has been viewed in a particularly favourable way since it became associated with emancipation and progress within Enlightenment thought. In a similar manner, formative assessment has generally been assumed to be benign, being understood as a process which aspires to support learning, as opposed to summative assessment which happens after learning and where judgements contribute to the accreditation of learning.

The paper therefore begins by deconstructing the interlocking set of assumptions that construct education and learning in a rosy, benign way. This draws upon curriculum theorists who have critiqued the historical association in Western philosophy of education and emancipation (Bingham and Biesta 2010), as well as more sociological understandings of the social practices of assessment (Broadfoot 1996; 2000; Madaus and Horn 2000; Torrance 2000; Delandshere 2001). Turning to the development of formative assessment, it draws on a recent research project conducted in Scottish

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Primary Schools Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Grant 08-0406 to suggest the need to consider this in a more critical light. Adopting a post-structural understanding of the subject, it concludes by asking what might become of formative assessment if it was to attempt to attend more explicitly to the wider social contexts which frame institutionalised learning, and thus take on a more political guise.

Education, learning and (formative) assessment: Some problematic interlocking assumptions

The importance attached to education within Western thinking was established before the emergence of mass schooling. From a philosophical perspective, writers such as Bingham and Biesta (2010) have illuminated the significance of Enlightenment thought in bringing together a powerful set of interlocking assumptions which they suggest remain pivotal to much discussion of education today. They trace the series of associations made in Emmanuel Kant's short text "*What is Enlightenment?*" (Kant, 1992) to show how this constructs man with a duty to make independent use of his reason and through this to arrive at truth – all of which is seen as leading to man's emancipation. This series of associations thus installs the ideal of the rational, autonomous agent in Western thought – but crucially, Kant also constructed education as central to this emancipation. Thus the notions of the use of reason, autonomy, emancipation and education became conjoined, constructed together as an ideal to which all should aspire.

A further important aspect of Enlightenment ideas is their privileging of a representational epistemology. Taylor (1995) suggests this to be a historically contingent understanding of signifying practices which arose in the 17th century (also see Barad 2008; Osberg and Biesta 2007; Crossouard & Pryor 2012). It assumes a binary relationship of the word and the material world, or an ontological separation between representations and what is being represented. The use of reason and application of appropriate methods was required to produce 'correct' knowledge which accurately re-presented an independent, external reality; such knowledge was also imbued with notions of certainty. This provided an epistemological foundation for the emergence of modern science, with its aspiration to produce universal, generalisable, ahistorical laws of nature. Within this, one might include the rise of psychometrics and behaviourism, which has been suggested to provide the disciplinary foundations of early educational assessment (Delandshere 2001).

Enlightenment thought foreshadowed the development of mass education in Western, modern societies. In contrast to the conjunction of education and emancipation, later post-foundationalist perspectives have analysed the emergence of institutionalised education as being linked to Western industrialisation and the rise of the nation-state. From these perspectives, rather than supporting 'autonomy', modern schooling could alternatively be analysed as addressing:

the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration in to systems of efficient and economic controls (Foucault 1976: 139).

Thus, rather than proposing an autonomous agent able to use his reason to construct transcendental knowledge, Foucault's analysis recognises how any human subject is constructed within and simultaneously contributes to a web of societal relations. From this perspective, schooling might instead be viewed as a key institutional site for the production of disciplined, indeed docile subjects. Foucault's analysis of modern institutions as depending upon processes of observation, surveillance and hierarchical, normalising judgement is also useful for considering the micro-practices of schooling, as well as for considering assessment processes, both formative and summative (Foucault, 1977). Rather than being 'objective' neutral processes that allow a 'true' reflection of individual ability, these can rather be recognised as reflecting value judgements that are contingent to particular cultural and historical points in time. Noting the remarkable rise of assessment and how "[f]rom its modest beginnings in the universities of the 18th century and the school systems of the 19th century" it was to become an "unquestioned arbitrator of value", Broadfoot goes on to note "the lack of any serious challenge to this hegemony" (2000, p. ix). A social technology which legitimises social stratification, assessment's power has also been related to the rise of social science disciplines such as psychometrics, which allow these value-laden processes to be imbued with objectivity, allowing them to gain legitimacy from being seen as neutral, largely technical processes (Delandshere 2001). Although addressing summative rather than formative assessment, Madaus and Horn (2000) also note how testing has become ubiquitous as a technology. Although typically (and mistakenly) understood to be neutral and value-free, they highlight its social and political ramifications, including how those in charge of testing became able "not only to objectify individuals, but also to form, describe and objectify groups" (p. 50). While historically the aims of testing might include the elimination of patronage, they note how the social technology of testing favours particular groups, given the influence of the cultural background of those involved in test development upon the selection of what is to be assessed, and how it is to be assessed.

In addition to such sociological analyses, within assessment and evaluation literature, others put forward arguments for a more socially located understanding of the judgement processes that might be made within a particular evaluative community (e.g. Parlett and Hamilton 1987; Sadler 1989). This literature also stresses how assessment judgements are situated and value-laden and are relevant for formative and summative assessment. In Sadler's 'standards-based' approach to assessment, what counts as quality cannot be known 'by precept', but is held in largely tacit ways in the standards of a teacher or assessor (Sadler, 1989). In addition to making the case for formative assessment, a crucial aspect of Sadler's work is therefore that language is

not assumed to bring transparency to assessment processes; his argument is instead for an instructional design that allows students to gain ‘direct evaluative experience’ within the assessment community, where coming to know what counts as quality has much which is tacit and experiential. However, much development of assessment and formative assessment in UK education contexts has been based on the premise that clear statements of learning objectives and task criteria could bring transparency to assessment practices. In higher education, one could include here the development of outcomes-based assessment, typically relying on highly-developed task descriptors and task criteria, although as Sadler (2005) has again pointed out, one cannot rely on language to make accessible the quality standards associated with these. Thus, the requirement to explain what constitutes a ‘sound level of critical thinking and discrimination’ only leads to questions such as what constitutes soundness.

Constructing answers to each of these questions sets up new verbal terms that in turn call for more elaboration, and so on in infinite regress (Sadler 2005, p. 192).

However, despite the recognition in much literature that situated qualitative judgement is an inevitable part of assessment processes, particularly for any complex tasks, these arguments have had to be repeated again and again. Wider developments such as the Bologna Group’s common framework for assessment also suggest a continuing over-reliance on specifications of levels and on language to bring standardisation and transparency to assessment. Important international bodies continue to place great faith in testing systems that aspire to deliver comparable judgements across a swathe of different cultural contexts – in addition to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), see OECD (2011) for ongoing developments such as the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), or the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC).

Turning to the development of formative assessment in UK schooling contexts, this has also been inflected by high aspirations, including the desire to raise attainment and to bring greater transparency to assessment. In England, policy-makers have strongly endorsed formative assessment in the guise of “assessment *for* learning” or *AfL*. Formative assessment is also integral to Scotland’s development of a new curriculum (Curriculum for Excellence, or *CfE*). With the aim to encompass the full spectrum of school provision, *CfE* aims at a “coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from 3 to 18”. It projects a broader view of learning than the acquisition of ‘content’, so that pupil development is considered to entail four ‘capacities’, of being successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009). At the same time, the reliance on a framework of learning outcomes organised in sequential levels leads Priestley and Humes (2010) to suggest that the new Scottish curriculum sits quite uneasily across mastery and process curricular models. In its approach to assessment and school evaluation, Scotland has continued to resist the coupling of school

evaluation with pupil attainment measures. Instead of using national standardised testing (as favoured in English schooling), it samples school performance. Assessment is nevertheless recognised as being central to classroom processes. Assessment *is for* Learning (AifL) constructs assessment as an ongoing process, involving assessment *for* learning, assessment *of* learning, and assessment *as* learning. Teacher, peer and self-assessment are all given importance within this (for fuller details of the development of AifL in Scotland than is possible here, and also a for helpful recognition of the complexities of change in professional practice, see Hayward and Spencer, 2010).

Even if quite different in their reliance or rejection of standardised testing, in both English and Scottish contexts, the use of task (or ‘success’) criteria and learning objectives has been central to formative assessment. As suggested above, one cannot assume that these can bring transparency to learning; however, some research into FA has suggested how this apparent promise can foster instrumentality, particularly within educational cultures where an overriding concern is for raising student attainment, rather than for any wider engagement with or questioning of the curriculum (Torrance, 2007).

Formative assessment: Instrumentality and individualisation

In order to exemplify some of the dangers of formative assessment, I now turn to data from the research project into formative assessment practices conducted in 2009 in Scottish primary schools. This aimed to explore formative assessment within ‘challenges’, this being a particular task design which involved pupils working in groups on a relatively open-ended task, and then each group doing a presentation to the rest of the class on their work at the end of a specified time. A ‘challenge’ task as proposed by the Critical Skills Programme (CSP) could involve extended periods of group work – challenges in the two observed classrooms lasted over 6 hours, spread over 3 or 4 days. Having been a prominent aspect of professional practice within a previous evaluation in the States of Jersey (Crossouard & Sebba, 2006), this task design had seemed to offer many possibilities for formative assessment, including both peer and teacher assessment (Crossouard, 2009), as well as supporting strong pupil engagement. The selection of the Scottish context was related to the evident desire within its educational policy-making to avoid the pitfalls of a high-stakes testing regime linked to accountability measures.

A case study approach was adopted to explore this task design in two classrooms in two primary schools which were also selected as critical cases, rather than for the sake of claiming representativeness (Flyvbjerg 2001). After securing consents from the relevant local authorities and schools, the case studies incorporated documentary analysis, video observation of the challenges (around six hours of classroom time in each class), a series of semi-structured interviews with headteachers and the teachers and a series of focus group interviews with the pupils of the participating classes conducted before and immediately after the challenges. After initial analysis, a third

series of interviews and focus groups focused on excerpts from the video data, provoking rich commentary on the part of both teachers and pupils. A final visit was devoted to sharing a draft report of the research with the teacher and the headteachers.

From responses in the first round of teacher interviews, FA was clearly seen by the case study teachers in a positive light. However, as illustrated in the quotation below, although well-intentioned, their depictions of formative assessment seemed to imply a construction of learning that was linear and quite tightly predefined. Formative assessment also seemed to be understood as a technical process which misrecognises the complexities of assessment judgements:

There are many AifL techniques that can be used quickly and easily to see where the children are at with their learning, how they are coping with their learning and where they are going with their learning. [...] I use a variety of formative assessment techniques on a daily basis (e.g. thumbs up, no hands, wait time, WALT, WILF etc). As teachers, we keep track of the techniques we are using by recording them in our forward plan. Children are aware of the techniques and know how to use them to improve their work and further their learning.

In contrast to this construction of learning with its emphasis on tracking, monitoring and control, the open-ended nature of this task design was especially welcomed by teachers and pupils. Challenges were described in teacher interviews as involving a mix of structure and freedom, so that pupils had space to '*put their own twist*' on the task in hand, which pupils were felt to benefit from:

So there's a kind of freedom element which I think most children thrive upon. And when they're in a group, the generating of ideas within the group, some of the things they can come up with – it's quite amazing. So sometimes making it quite open-ended the product, or how it's to be presented, it's great, because what they'll come up with to do is maybe nothing that I'd even considered. The road I was going down was completely different, [and] as long as they've tackled the challenge and learned what they're supposed to learn, that doesn't matter.

This exemplifies the tensions which confront teachers over attending to the multiple purposes of education, whereby they must bring together an aspiration for open-ended learning with its 'freedom element' (learning that aspires to emancipation), with wider curriculum demands of 'what they're supposed to learn'. This latter aspect constructs learning more narrowly, as a form of socialisation, or cultural transmission. However, events of the 20th century have shown that what counts as socialisation merits ongoing scrutiny and the ways that education can be used as a propaganda tool by illiberal regimes – in other words, education is inherently political and should be open to contestation.

Here a particularly interesting feature of the research data is that the teachers designed very complex tasks which illuminated a range of highly political issues, thus creating the potential for rich classroom discussions that could illuminate contested issues. For example, in one class each group was asked to form a political party, decide on its name, develop a manifesto, then present this to the class. This task was therefore

explicitly political – and the issues pupils chose for their manifestoes recognised this, including aspects such as local violence, environmental issues, and tensions in their school contexts such as bullying. In the other, the challenge was focused on different kinds of energy, and here environmental concerns also brought an overt political dimension to the pupils' work, which they recognised in the ways they developed their presentations. For example, as discussed in Crossouard (2012) (forthcoming), one group's presentation was done as a 'drama', in which a pupil dressed in tweeds depicted a wealthy landowner resisting the development of renewable energy on his land, while others in more motley clothing demonstrated in favour of such developments. Overall, rather than learning outcomes that were tightly pre-defined, the challenge tasks which the teachers constructed potentially created opportunities for discussions of wider social values with overt political dimensions.

However, despite the ways that a challenge task supported pupil engagement with political issues, any engagement with such aspects seemed to be constrained by the vocabularies inherited by the teachers to engage with pupils' presentations. Rather than developing any social commentary on substantive issues, discussions of pupils' work and pupils' self-assessment became deflected into commentary about 'specific observable behaviours', or personal aspects such as their collaboration skills, how well they had worked as a team, or the 'maturity' they showed in their group work. Where teacher commentary did address the substance of the work which pupils had produced, this was mostly in terms of it having good '*information*', or for the quantity of its '*content*', rather than reflecting a wider critical engagement with its arguments and concerns. In other words, the political aspects at the heart of the task and pupils' responses to it were largely left implicit.

What is more, the discussion of the personal aspects such as the ways pupils had worked together seemed to gloss over the tensions which emerged in observation data and focus groups. The emphasis on teamwork and on the classroom community was clearly linked to CSP professional development initiative, which stressed the importance of creating a 'safe community'. In contexts of substantial social deprivation, this aspiration had a powerful and very understandable appeal. It was given importance in teacher interviews, as well as being reflected in the task criteria developed by both teachers and by pupils. However, observation data of classroom processes showed how this discourse could also be used as disciplinary device e.g. a pupil found himself being ordered around by his group but, after resisting this, his refusal to comply was reported to a teaching assistant, who then reprimanded him for his dissent with the rebuke "*are you not a member of this team then?*" In addition to the potential for this discourse of community and teamwork to produce injustices, the pupil focus groups as well as observation data suggested powerful pupil hierarchies. For example, task roles had been renamed in one classroom so that, instead of a group facilitator, one group had a 'team leader'. When asked how they differed, pupils expressed this in ways that reflected strong, hierarchical masculinities: *bossy; telling you to do some-*

thing different than you actually did; just basically commanding you about. This was borne out in the observations. Another male pupil overruled others' ideas in a peremptory way, or when others brought him work to review, he crossed out their text, saying "*well, take out all that*". Snatches of discourse about playground fights or who was the toughest in the class also suggested a culture of strong masculinities amongst the boys; kicking games between male pupils were also conducted under tables, clearly causing pain. So despite the aspirations towards this, for some this was very far from being a 'safe community'.

Both case studies suggest that a fear of peer derision underpinned the power of peer formative assessment of group presentations, although pupils were positioned differently in this respect. One teacher described presentations as appealing to the male '*class clown*' and some male pupils with misbehaviour records did prove enthusiastic about doing presentations. However, assessment hierarchies left lower-attaining pupils vulnerable to the criticisms of higher-attaining pupils. Video observation data showed silent but embodied derision of a female pupil struggling to pronounce an unfamiliar word during a presentation; biting criticisms of this were later expressed by high-attaining pupils in a focus group. Some pupils also expressed fear of others' critique when doing their presentations – these were "*scary*", given that others could be watching from the back of the class, whispering derogatory comments.

Some aspects of classroom assessment also seemed to encourage pupils' acceptance of assessment as a technical, value-free practice. In one case study, peer ranking of complex issues was encouraged e.g. pupils were asked to rank each other on their 'skills' of *responsibility* or *confidence* on a scale of *not yet, getting there, at strength*. As reported in Crossouard (2011), despite the highly subjective nature of how 'responsibility' or 'confidence' might have been exercised within the challenge by different pupils, and how this might be judged, this seemed to raise no issues, whether in the classroom or later interviews. In another peer assessment exercise, pupils were asked to write their comments about the ways others in their group had contributed to the challenge – here some pupils felt able to influence what was written, while others were afraid of what might be written about them. One pupil who was recognised as having learning difficulties queried this – but as was pointed out to him by the teacher, the rest of the class were doing it, making it strange that he should question this. Digital photographs taken by one teacher were also used to provide a highly embodied form of feedback, in ways that were potentially confirmatory to some, but leaving others again exposed to derision (Crossouard 2012) (forthcoming).

Overall, these practices raise questions about the kinds of reflexivity that can be produced in the name of formative assessment and associated inequities, particularly given that its association with the vocabulary of 'specific observable behaviours' also gave it a semblance of objectivity. As argued in Crossouard (2011), the term suggests that observation happens without interpretation, that language corresponds in a

transparent way to an objectively knowable reality, and that performances can be judged in a de-socialised way. It also loses sight of the inherently political nature of institutionalised learning and the ways that a desire to produce citizens of a particular kind can be embedded within a national curriculum. Biesta (2009) has critiqued the rise of a performative culture in education, whereby means becomes ends. He also questions the validity of educational assessment, querying if we are “measuring what we value, or measuring what can easily be measured”. However, I would suggest that the language of ‘specific observable behaviours’ fosters an assumption that we can easily measure values which might more appropriately be considered immeasurable, rather than supporting a critical engagement with their complexity.

This is not to say that teachers were at all naive about the contexts that they were working in – interview conversations reflected an acute awareness of the difficult social contexts of their schools. This included awareness of aspects such as gender and social class – for example when discussing an analysis of classroom observation data, one head teacher called my attention to the wider social context and its influence on the pupils’ interactions:

remember what kind of community this is... the masculine environment [is] strong, not always positive [...] staff have said he just looks at me, you’re a woman... [this is a] mining thing.. [a] working class thing.. women [can be treated as] underdogs. (researcher notes from discussion of draft research report).

However, while these insights were vividly present within conversations with the researcher outside the classroom, the language of the classroom meant that such issues became obscured by the concern for pupils’ presentation skills and their group work, meaning also that the ‘content’ of their presentations was treated in a depoliticised way.

Instead, the focus on pupils’ social skills and attributes such as confidence or maturity suggests the ways that formative assessment can function as a technology which engenders a powerful focus on the self, encouraging the pupil to internalise responsibility to self-fashion in line with classroom norms (even where these seemed somewhat inequitable). It allows the normalisation of practices such as the ranking of (highly complex) behaviours, and the internalisation in conjuncture with their association with assessment given these the appearance of having some ‘objective’ legitimacy. Such practices produce the individuation of the pupil in ways that seem well-aligned with a wider neoliberal ethic which privileges individual choice and responsibility – in its assumptions of the rational, autonomous individual, this also readily aligns with the assumptions of the self of Western philosophy. However, in their strong focus on the individual, they do not make available for critique the social arbitrary which allows some ways of being to be assumed legitimate, and others to be pathologised. Given the difficult contexts in which these schools were located, teachers’ desire to construct a ‘safe community’ is wholly understandable. However, as shown in Crossouard (forthcoming), classroom community dynamics also reflected social

class and gendered hierarchies which privileged the agency of some pupils and left others vulnerable to peer critique.

Formative assessment: Its political possibilities?

Returning to what might count as ‘quality’ in assessment, and the prior question this raises about what might count as quality in education, I would argue that this must involve attention to its inherently political nature. I draw here on Biesta (2009), who critiques the current performative turn in education with its focus on measurement rather than values and instead calls for a more questioning approach to the purposes of education. He stresses that education is never neutral, but a process through which social, cultural and political traditions are imparted (socialisation), as well as a process through which new subjects or human actors emerge (subjectification). He highlights the importance of both, while stressing that subjectification involves more than the “insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing orders” (p. 40), although also expressing some doubts about the ways contemporary education systems contribute to this.

Biesta (2009) also addresses assessment, albeit primarily its summative function for the accreditation of learning. In relation to formative assessment, while Biesta himself does not use this term, a concern for education to attend to the emergence of new subjectivities would make it important for formative assessment to move beyond the assumptions of instrumentality and socialisation and also address the political nature of education and its socio-historical contingencies. In arguing for this, I build on the work of Torrance and Pryor (1998) and later work into formative assessment in postgraduate contexts (Pryor & Crossouard 2008; 2010). This has stressed the complexity of formative assessment, as well as developing the distinction between convergent and divergent assessment. In Torrance and Pryor (1998), the first involves a focus on curriculum requirements, on whether the student knows a predefined thing, while divergent assessment reflects a concern for student meaning-making and their agendas – so reflecting a more open concern for what the student knows. They are seen as poles on a continuum of practice, which aspire to attend to education as socialisation (the convergent) *and* education involving the emergence of new subjects, bringing something new into the world (divergent). As argued in Crossouard (2011), an extreme privileging of either could be problematic – at its best, formative assessment is seen as involving movement across the two poles of the continuum.

However, a key aspect in this understanding of formative assessment is the suggestion that the educator opportunistically exploit moments when they might call attention to wider social and political structures during discussions with students (Pryor & Crossouard 2010; Crossouard 2011). As shown above, the substantive focus of pupils’ presentations illuminated such issues and could have provided a potential opening for such discussions. If classroom language had not encouraged a focus on aspects such as individual and group performances, these substantive issues could have become a point of departure for a discussion of the wider social class norms

which pupils themselves had illuminated e.g. the landowner in his tweed jacket resisting the development of renewable energies that might also have brought employment opportunities to less privileged groups. As Pryor and Lubisi (2001) suggest, the teacher might opportunistically exploit potential conflict situations to explore social relations, so that they become part of the pedagogic focus of the classroom. In this way, the educator also recognises difference (rather than consensus) as constitutive of our social worlds (also see Pryor & Crossouard, 2010).

In addition to exploiting such opportunities, Pryor & Crossouard (2010) also provide examples of an educator drawing attention to the power relations which frame institutionalised learning and the positioning of the educator within this. This does not assume that institutionalised learning brings emancipation, and is necessarily 'good', nor that formative assessment is necessarily benign. It aims instead to illuminate the conditions of possibility that frame both student and educator (ibid 2010). Rather than assuming education to involve a relationship where the educator brings emancipation to the learner, this discourse addresses what Rancière has called the "police order, or an 'an order of the visible and sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noises'" (Rancière, in Bingham and Biesta 2010, p. 9). By acknowledging that the spaces of education are inevitably part of such an order, this kind of discourse is open to the possibility of politics, or the point 'when these mechanisms are stopped in their tracks'.

Conclusion

The paper has aimed to problematise the relationship of 'quality' and assessment by pointing to the significance of a further, more important question, that of the quality of education itself. While many understandings of formative assessment unhelpfully coincide with a somewhat instrumental understanding of learning which seems to be predominantly about socialisation and accreditation, the paper also raises the possibility of a more political kind of formative assessment which aims to contribute to a wider understanding of education which includes attention to the emergence of new subjectivities. However, this would involve attention to the implications of the languages at teachers' disposal to consider assessment, the recognition of the value-laden nature of institutionalised education and its assessment systems, and finally an openness to these values being questioned and renewed as part of a wider commitment to social justice.

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