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## **Open dialogue peer review: A response to Professor Lucas**

Yvonne Skipper

Drawing on work being undertaken by Rethinking Assessment in the UK and on previous work commissioned by the Centre for Strategic Education in Melbourne, in this paper Lucas encourages us to consider what we want our young people to learn during their education and then design assessments which actually test this. As schools are increasingly turning into ‘exams factories’ he encourages us to challenge our thinking around ‘what’ is being assessed and ‘how’ and to move towards a more strengths-based model. The paper raises important points about the future of assessment in schools and raises questions for me about how these might be enacted in practice and how they may impact educational equality in the UK.

A key point in this paper is the tension between assessment of knowledge and skills. Lucas states that the English national curriculum is focused more on content knowledge, while the Welsh curriculum is more broadly focused on development of skills and competencies. When acquisition of knowledge is seen as the main purpose of education, an emphasis on skills may be seen as ‘distracting’ or ‘dumbing down’. This point is further developed in Lucas (2019) where he discusses how employers often refer to these as ‘soft skills’, which diminishes their importance. In contrast, the OECD (2016) model for education until 2030 has knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values intertwining to show competencies and lead to action. Therefore, it seems clear that skills should be considered a vital component of education, but as Professor Lucas states, these skills may be the “dispositions or capabilities known to be important in life (which) are not assessed at all”.

The Scottish curriculum for Excellence has similarities with the Welsh curriculum, aiming to develop young people who are: Successful learners, Confident individuals, Responsible citizens, and Effective contributors. But broad policies such as these can be

difficult to enact into practice. As Lucas states, ‘what gets measured tends to get taught’ so it is vital to rethink assessment as part of developing curriculum and in developing our young people. I was particularly struck with the section where Lucas discusses promising examples of how educators could evidence pupils’ all-round strengths more effectively. While they provide promising avenues to allow learners and their teachers to understand strengths and weaknesses, there may be issues in trying to quantify them in a way that can be used effectively, for example by prospective employers. It is therefore important to consider the perspectives of various stakeholders about what to assess and how to evidence achievement, consider how changes may impact educational equality, and decide how changes might best be implemented into practice.

The first suggestion is that we could utilise psychometric tests to evidence aspects of character, wellbeing or metacognition. A report by Marshall et al. (2017) which surveyed 880 schools in England found that almost all schools were seeking to promote character skills to enhance good citizenship (97%) and academic achievement (84%). However, measuring character can be challenging as assessments typically only measure one element of character and there is a difference between giving the ‘right answer’ and caring, feeling for another and acting in an appropriate way. Davis (2003, p. 9) argues that character is displayed in how we act “when we think no one is watching.” This means that assessing character can be particularly challenging. Furthermore, measuring wellbeing and meta-cognition may help teachers and learners to become more aware of themselves, and enhance self-reflection and understanding. This is likely to lead to positive outcomes. However, if these were to be used as some form of evidence or assessment, learners could be taught to respond in the ‘right’ way or may simply respond in a socially desirable way. Therefore, careful consideration into how these sorts of tools could be used effectively, for example as a foundation for self-reflection, or upon beginning a portfolio of work, would be needed.

Lucas also argues that rather than focusing on recall or computations, as is typical, multiple-choice tests could be used to assess dispositions such as critical thinking. While this is an important ideal and there are some examples of how this can be done (e.g., creative thinking assessments in PISA OECD, 2019) it is also vital to consider how these would be used. For an example, the ‘Eleven plus’ test, a selective entry exam, was widely used in the UK to stream 11-year-old children into secondary schools, with those who passed attending grammar schools which had a more academic focus. The original idea of the test was that it tapped into ‘natural ability’, and so performance in these tests could not be improved by tutoring. It was thought that this would give all pupils the opportunity to achieve high grades (Vernon, 1957). However, children do receive tutoring for selective entry exams (Bunting & Mooney, 2001) and these children perform better in the exam (Egan & Bunting, 1991). Unsurprisingly, many of the parents who pay for external tutoring for their children are employed in non-manual occupations (Noden et al., 1998). Multiple choice tests of skills such as teamwork, and creativity may suffer from similar issues, with certain pupils receiving extra coaching to help them give the correct answers, meaning results would reflect this extra support rather than skills. While those from the highest SES backgrounds are the most likely to receive tutoring or extra support in any assessment, it is vital to consider whether any changes to assessment may exacerbate existing educational inequalities.

Lucas also discusses on demand testing, where students only sit a test when their teachers feel they are ready for it. This would reduce the numbers of pupils going forward for exams when they are not ready. This seems like a logical idea for more individual activities such as driving tests, but care needs to be taken with this approach in schools. For example, in the case of selective entry examinations, where pupils are told not to sit the exam, for example if their teachers do not think they are likely to pass it, this leads to similarly negative outcomes as actually failing (Skipper & Douglas, 2016). While this is a different situation as

with the Eleven plus exam, pupils could not choose to sit the exam at a later date, pupils who are delayed in taking exams when compared to their peers may feel like a failure and may lose motivation. It would therefore be important to consider how on-demand testing could be presented in schools where pupils are learning in a group setting, to ensure that it did not lead pupils to feel negative about themselves and their abilities. This is particularly important post-Covid as some pupils may not have had any schooling during the period when schools were closed, while others may have benefitted from extensive tutoring and support. Therefore, certain groups may be 'left behind' by policies such as these.

Performance in assessments is used by universities and employers to select students. Many universities now offer contextualised admissions or adjusted offers, considering the context of an applicant's attainment. This means that universities may offer a student who has experienced difficult circumstances a lower threshold for entry to a course than a student from a more stable or affluent background. There are arguments both for and against contextual admissions (Centre for Social Mobility, 2018). It is argued that prior qualifications are the best predictor of success at university so taking on students with lower grades may be setting them up to fail. However, those who argue for contextual admissions argue that students who have been disadvantaged but achieve reasonable grades are likely very capable and have a genuine potential to succeed in HE and "a university place is not a prize for how well you have done in the past, but recognition of what you are likely to do in the future" (CSM, 2018, p. 7). The Schwartz (2004) Review of University Admissions concluded that "it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances" p.6 and while the debate about contextual offers continues within universities, these sorts of discussions do not typically take place in the workplace. However, contextualised grades may be another

path to understanding what grades and skills assessments actually tell us about learners and which should be offered placed on university courses and in workplaces.

Once we decide on how best to assess pupils, and what these assessments mean, it is then important to ensure that this can be evidenced. The discussion of the National Record of Achievement which was trialled in the UK in the 90s shows how the idea of a portfolio linking academic and non-academic achievements is not new. However, it was largely unsuccessful due to issues around technology which made it difficult to share portfolios and to track people over time. New technology would allow us to develop a personal profile, perhaps linked to a URL to allow for longevity, showcasing not just pupil's grades but their broader skills and this could travel with the learner across their life. Indeed, the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) is doing this in Higher Education and tracks academic work, extra-curricular activities, prizes and employability awards, voluntary work and offices held in student union clubs and societies which have been verified by the institution. It can be used by employers to ascertain student's broad skills but can also be used by students and staff, for example during personal tutoring sessions to facilitate discussions about strengths and weaknesses. It is important to consider how non-standardised elements, for example regarding skills, are presented in these records. In the past, these may have been based on teacher report, which have been subject to bias and time consuming to produce. They also took time for employers to read and understand, which may also partly explain the lack of buy-in from employers. If we truly want to change our assessment and recording system, then it is vital that a variety of stakeholders are involved in the development of a new system, to ensure that these will be useable, useful, trusted and not a large burden on staff to produce and use.

A further practical step that Lucas suggests we can take is to enhance the assessment literacy of teachers for example by creating a *Visible Assessment* practical toolkit based on

research evidence. The suggested topics such as purpose and consequence, depth and breadth, authenticity and progression and improvement are important to give educators space to explore their own thinking about assessment. But of course, this cannot be done by teachers alone. Those who develop policy and set national assessments would also need to be involved in any consultation in order to achieve real-world change. Furthermore, since 2018 there has been increasing emphasis on pupil participation and pupil voice in schools in Scotland. This is partly driven by the Scottish Government's commitment to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law. This states that young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect them (Education Scotland, 2018). The voice of pupil's is therefore vital in any plan to restructure our assessment practices.

In conclusion, this interesting paper challenges us to reflect on what key knowledge and skills we want our young people to have, and how we can best assess these to move towards a more 'strengths-based' education system. While I agree with the ideas expressed, it is important that multiple stakeholders work together to consider what these new assessments would look like, be evidenced, and how they can be practically implemented in UK classrooms in a way that does not increase educational inequalities and could perhaps reduce them.

### **Author**

Dr Yvonne Skipper

Senior Lecturer in Psychology (Education)

University of Glasgow

St Andrews Building

11 Eldon Street

Glasgow,

G36NH

## Correspondence

Email: [Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Yvonne.Skipper@glasgow.ac.uk)

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