THE CURSE OF CASS

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I have chosen to speak not as an academic but as an educational practitioner – as a classroom teacher and a manager - and as someone who has contact with a wide range of teachers, both in South Africa and abroad. What I have to say is based on a speech delivered to officials of the WCED earlier this year and later expanded into an article which was published *COMMENT*, the official publication of the National Union of Educators.

The general view amongst many teachers is that Continuous Assessment (CASS) has gone horribly wrong. What was launched as the flagship of the new curriculum has now foundered on the rocks of bureaucracy.

As I see it, there were two main objectives for introducing CASS:

The first was to break down the high-stakes, once-off examination system, which meant that pupils were promoted or not promoted on the basis of one examination – at Matric level at least.. As one writer on the topic[1] put it:

> … while I was revising with learners and informing them on the number of papers they would be writing [at the end of the year], one learner asked, 'Sir, why are we taught for a whole year and then given a one-and-half hour paper to determine whether or not we know the subject?'

He goes on to say:

> This is a question that has been bothering educational practitioners since time immemorial. Would a one short examination adequately assess what a learner has learnt over along period of schooling? How would you grade a learner who happens to fall ill and could not write the final examinations?

The second objective was to encourage teachers to use assessment for formative purposes as well – ie to provide feedback to teachers and pupils which would guide learning.

The same writer puts it thus:

> One of the advantages of continuous assessment lies in it being guidance oriented. Since it will involve data gathering over a long period of time, it will yield more accurate data reaching the teachers early enough to modify instruction. This could play a vital role in diagnosing and remediating areas of learners' weaknesses …

Regarding the first objective - to break down the high-stakes, once-off examination system: This is still the case at Matric level (and possibly intended to be at Grade 9 level), because CASS is moderated according to examination norms – which are still regarded as the only reliable result. So teachers wonder why they need to bother with CASS if it isn't achieving the intended objective. To them it simply implies more work without overcoming the 'problem'.

Regarding the second objective - to encourage teachers to use assessment for formative purposes: What began as CASS is no longer CASS because of the *formalisation* of this form of assessment. This is necessary if it is to contribute to the achievement of a national qualification. It is also necessary for some teachers – it may be the only way to ensure that those with the if-it-doesn't-'count'-it-won't-happen mentality will actually implement it.

But with formalisation has come standardisation – and, although this is done most formally at Matric level, it filters down, because lower grades need to be moderated in similar fashion to avoid pupils doing well and then suddenly having their results adjusted at Matric level. Some form of standardisation is obviously essential if it is to be part of the assessment for a national qualification. However, this has led to problems which have undermined the main value of CASS and resulted in educational and practical consequences that irk and concern teachers.

From an educational point of view, teachers are so bogged down with the numerous formal CASS tasks which will 'count' that they do not have time to do informal, formative CASS. For example, if my English class is struggling with reading and comprehending, I might wish to set a series of assignments on this – but they won't produce 'normal' results, because this is only one aspect of the English curriculum. So what does one do? Set assessment tasks that will lend themselves to standardised results instead. Teachers become frustrated because all assessment, in effect, becomes summative – the very opposite of what it was intended to be. They end up doing what was criticised in the old system – setting tests on things that they don't want to test!

The problem has arisen from the fact that, by laying down very specific CASS criteria, teachers focus on the tasks rather than using CASS as a form of teaching. The quotation above regarding the advantage of CASS concludes with a very important caveat:

> One of the advantages of continuous assessment lies in it being guidance oriented. Since it will involve data gathering over a long period of time, it will yield more accurate data reaching the teachers early enough to modify instruction. This could play a vital role in diagnosing and remediating areas of learners' weaknesses *if properly anchored in what occurs in the classroom. (My italics)*

Therein lies the rub – continuous assessment becomes what another commentator on the topic[2] calls 'continuous testing' – something which is divorced from the day-to-day learning and teaching activities of the classroom. Good teachers always used informal

continuous assessment by adopting an interactive teaching style and by checking where their pupils are by questions, mini-tests, relevant assignments and exercises, and so on. This approach ensures that continuous assessment fulfils a formative role. The best informal definition of 'formative' I have come across is that of a British academic[3]:

> … it's all those things that teachers and students do together that help teachers know where learners are when they are learning and what they need to do to improve and how to go about it.

This is far cry from the practice which has built up of 'doing' continuous assessment for the portfolio, a far cry from a system which has become an end in itself rather than a means to and end.

The new system has also had a particular impact on boys. In the midst of great concern throughout the world about boy's education at the moment, comes CASS to bedevil things further. There are those who believe CASS favours girls above boys. In an article from *The Spectator* (30 January 2001), Dr Madson Pirie cites research which has shown that, since the early nineties, girls have been improving their performance against that of boys in exams to the extent that they are outperforming the boys in school O-levels, A-levels and university degrees.

The question which was naturally asked was *Why?* Various answers about the diligence of girls and the changing nature of society were mooted. But Dr Pirie provided an alternative explanation, namely that examinations had been 'feminised', that the old exams tended to reward 'the qualities which boys are good at'. That is, they 'favoured risk-taking and grasp of the whole picture rather than the more systematic, consistent, attention-to-detail qualities which favour girls'. The change from the high-risk system of examinations in favour of CASS, it is argued, makes it not surprising that the girls are now doing better.

A further educational issue is the fact that the system ignores the fact the pupils mature during the course of a year. The later work should, if there is effective teaching and

learning going on, be better; yet one cannot take only the later work for the purpose of a CASS mark.

So much for the educational problems. The system is also fraught with major practical problems, one of the main of which is the increase in the workload of teachers. This results from various factors:

- The **number of assessment tasks** – just look at the Matrics alone (eg Biology has 18 assessment requirements for CASS!)

- The use of **rubrics**, which require hours of preparation and which ignore the professional judgement of the teacher. Surely a mere list of criteria would suffice?

- The **additional moderation** that needs to be done internally. I'm not questioning the need for internal moderation – but internal moderation of a huge number of tasks is time-consuming.

- The **cluster meetings** – which teachers resent, as they feel that what happens there does not really matter anyway, as the results will later be moderated by subject advisors and, in Matric, by Umalusi.

- Then there is the time that has to be spent **collating** and assembling everything into portfolios – especially considering the silly frills that are sometimes expected – a monumental task.

- What about the time to liaise with **subject advisors**?

- There are also **additional demands** made by some local office officials. This emerges when one makes comparisons across the board.

Teachers feel that their workload has increased at the expense of proper teaching and assessing.

And all this has to be done with ever-bigger classes and with ever-declining standards of work ethic and behaviour. And we must remember that it occurs in the context of a new curriculum, other changes, Whole School Evaluation, Developmental appraisal, Performance Appraisal, teaching about Aids, attending training meetings, meetings, meetings and meetings. All of this means greater demands on teachers and managers alike.

It is interesting to note that, in a recent piece of research in South Africa[4], one of the reasons cited by teachers for lowering their morale is the increasing workload – and especially the paperwork, of which CASS forms a significant part.

All this is aggravated by the attitude of some officials in the departments of education, including subject advisors – not only regarding CASS, but including this. It is worthy of note that, in the research mentioned above, the biggest single factor which caused low morale amongst teachers was the 'leadership style of the Department of Education' – 'a significant 65,5% of the respondents viewed the leadership style of the provincial departments of education as a source of negative morale amongst themselves'.

The result is that teachers are overloaded, frustrated, resentful and disillusioned. Teachers fluctuate between passive disobedience and open rebellion; they are becoming more and more anti-department – witness the shouting out at meetings, the hostile attitudes, and so on. In NZ, it is interesting to note, many schools refused to implement the second stage of their new 'Senior Certificate course' (NCEA) last year because of the demands of CASS.

What is worse is that teachers are leaving or wanting to leave the profession. In the UK workload cited as the number one reason for teachers quitting the profession. Australia,

New Zealand, the UK all speak of a looming shortage of teachers. One of the writers cited earlier comments as follows:

As the examples from Kentucky, Vermont, Boston, and Philadelphia suggest, the shift to wards adopting 'new' assessments is wrenching for teachers. … Kentucky teachers became stressed, began leaving the profession, and the teachers who remained were burning out as well.'

She adds that 'The implicit warning for South Africa are obvious'. Must we go the same way? Shouldn't we try to remove any factor which contributes to all of this?

We must also not forget the pupils in all of this. They are also stressed by it all – especially the Grade 12's, who have to do at least 72 CASS assessments in what is virtually six months of schooling.

So what can be done? The answer does not lie in an either-or approach – either we have CASS or we do away with it. CASS has great value for education, but it is essential that the educational and practical implications be fundamentally re-examined with a view to making the system serve its proper purpose and make it implementable. Similarly, the either-or mentality does not solve the issue of whether CASS 'counts' or does not 'count' for promotion and progression – it means finding a balance between how much and what counts and what does not. A few suggestions to improve the sytem:

- Reduce the number of formal tasks so that informal, formative continuous assessment can take its rightful place in teaching and learning. This will not only reduce the workload and avoid the problems associated with boys' education, but

- Remove the fancy frills that often accompany CASS – pretty portfolios as opposed to labelled sections in workbooks.

- Allow for a leading of later assessment to overcome the maturity issue

- Call upon educational officials to adopt a more sympathetic and realistic attitude towards the plight of teachers and pupils.

- Above all: Remember that the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof. The real test, therefore, is to ask the eaters of the pudding before designing recipes for disaster which have the eaters choking and spitting it out!

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[1] Alausa, YA (no date): 'Continuous Assessment in our schools: Advantages and problems', Internet publication.
[2] Cress, Katherine (1996: ' Continuous Assessment in South Africa: A Promising strategy for educational change?' Talk delivered at the 1996 Conference on Equity in Education Assessment of the Association for the Study of Evaluation in Southern Africa.
[3] Willliam, Dylan (2002): Interview published in ENGLISH IN EDUCATION, Autumn 2002, Vol 36 No 3.
[4] Hayward, R (2002): 'Educator morale in South Africa 2002: Report on the finding's, commissioned by the National Professional Teachers Associations of South Africa (NAPTOSA).