The ITC and *Assessment*

John Raven
30 Great King St.,
Edinburgh EH3 6QH
jraven@ednet.co.uk
Website: www.eyeonsociety.co.uk

Version Date: 21 July 2014

In the course of reports to this year's AGM, there were several references to "assessment" … I think primarily in connection with standards.

This prompted me to comment that the ITC has, in the past, been preoccupied with tests and neglected the wider issues of assessment.

This has been despite the fact that, more than a century ago, Spearman[i] argued that neither measures of ***g***, nor the tests from the intercorrelations between which ***g*** had emerged, had any place in schools.

This was because the word "education" is derived from the same root as "eductive ability", thus implying a process designed to *draw out* the diverse talents of all pupils.

The use of "ability" tests diverts the attention of parents, teachers, and politicians away from this process[ii].

But Spearman's worst nightmares have been confirmed. Egged on by testing enthusiasts, the coming of international Olympics based on testing in the conventional subject areas has become stronger and stronger and led to more and standardised testing at more and more ages within schools. Less and less importance is attached to "extra curricular" activities despite the fact that these should not, in reality, be "extra".

Also, more and more importance is attached to "academic" performance in selecting entrants for occupations.

These observations may appear to refer to matters largely beyond our control with the implication that it is the responsibility of others to fix them.

However, in an effort to perhaps induce the Commission to accept more of the responsibility, let me first draw attention to the fact that about one third of pupils are seriously damaged by the current knowledge-focussed "educational" process. This teaches many pupils that they are failures, just scum[iii]. Attempts to remedy this through "remedial" programmes which essentially concentrate on "more of the same" end up reinforcing this process[iv].

It would therefore seem that we are caught up in a process which is highly unethical.

But it is not just this process that is highly unethical.

How professional, even ethical, is it to offer people supposedly "objective" assessments which record that they have low scores on variables a, b, and c but fail to indicate their strengths?

And even this is not the most serious of the ethical problems stemming from the role we are currently proud to embrace.

These assessments contribute to the legitimisation and perpetuation of divided societies in which large sectors of the population are subject to demeaning treatment at the hands of the "welfare" services … and worse.

Worse still, these social hierarchies more or less compel people to participate in the largely destructive activities of which modern societies are largely composed. The benefits of successful competition in these hierarchies are much less than is commonly supposed (for example, they confer little by way of enhancing quality of life) – but they ***do*** inflict enormous damage on our habitat, thereby contributing, at an exponentially accelerating rate, to our imminent extinction as a species[v].

What could be less intelligent? What could be more unethical?

There have, of course, been several efforts to broaden the basis of assessment of which Gardner's is perhaps the best known.

But these attempts mostly still seek to reduce the variance in human talents and abilities to scores on a small number of "variables". Even Spearman fell into this trap.

But ask yourself where chemists or biologists would have got to if they had attempted to summarise and discuss the variance in substances, plants, animals, and habitats in terms of scores on a few "variables".

A category-based, *descriptive*, framework was needed. A framework which enabled us to describe the transformational interactions which take place between chemicals, plants, and animals and their "environments".

My point is that it is not only vital for ITC to promote more research on assessment as distinct from testing, it is also necessary for us to promote work which will contribute to a transformation in the very way we think about abilities and assessment itself.

Appendix

An Illustration of Multiple Talent Education and its Outcomes.

To illustrate the kind of educational process which can be deployed to lead pupils to develop and display a wide variety of commonly overlooked talents, let me summarise some results from a study of a mixed age (8-11), mixed ability, class[vi] we conducted some years ago. The pupils were engaged in what was mostly an out-of-school, environmentally-based, educational process. At the time we studied them, their project involved trying to do something about the pollution in the local river. Some were scientist types trying to measure the levels of pollution and produce a report which would induce government officials to do something about it. Others took the line that everyone already knew the river was polluted and that the problem was to get something done about it. They set about making poster-sized drawings of the dead fish and plants along the river bank with a view to evoking emotions and action. Others set about generating captions for the posters – again writing in such a way as to evoke emotions which would generate action rather than in a form designed to meet teacher- or government-generated criteria of "good writing". Another got engaged in devious (political) strategies to motivate politicians to put pressure on the local environmental standards officer. Others specialised in soothing the conflicts which developed between the scientist types and artist types. And so on.

Here we have the development of a wide variety of high-level competencies[vii] the "existence" and development of each of which depends on tapping each individual's motives and creating situations in which they could develop and display their idiosyncratic talents and patterns of competence.

But that is not all. Without the context of others engaged in related tasks they could not have developed these competencies. Indeed many of those talents could only *exist* in those contexts. Outwith that context they could not even be said to possess them. They were *emergent* competencies.

Not only that, the class as a whole displayed an emergent property which might be described as "collective intelligence" or "a climate of enterprise". Note that this emergent competence of the group, *qua* group, did not exist in anyone's head. Indeed it did not "exist" anywhere. It was a *systems* property. Yet it was a real emergent property - just as the properties of copper sulphate are emergent properties distinct from the properties of copper, sulphur, and oxygen. Nevertheless, it was produced by, and reciprocally affected, the emergent individual competencies of the pupils in the group. Note, too, that the *system itself* was able to learn in exactly the same way as individual human beings as organic systems learn.

And, beyond all that, was the *managerial* competence of the teacher to orchestrate this developmental process.

Note the problems which these observations pose for mainstream ways of thinking about, assessing, and nurturing "competence", not to mention managerial competence.

Endnotes

[i] I think, but am not at this point certain, that the reference is: Spearman, C. (1924). *Some Issues in the Theory of **g** (Including the Law of Diminishing Returns)*. Proceedings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science: Section J - Psychology, 174-181. Southampton, England.

[ii] A brief example of what this might imply more widely will be found in an Appendix. A fuller discussion will be found in Raven, J. (1994). *Managing Education for Effective Schooling: The Most Important Problem Is to Come to Terms with Values*. Unionville, New York: Trillium Press. Edinburgh, Scotland: Competency Motivation Project, 30, Great King Street, Edinburgh EH3 6QH. http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/fulllist.html#managing_education

[iii] Raven, J. (2012). Toward professionalism in psychology and education. *Psychology of Education Review, 36(1*), 3-18, along with *Author' response to peer commentary*, pp. 38-43.
Raven, J. (2012). Competence, education, professional development, psychology, and socio-cybernetics. In G. J. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Continuing Education: Types, Roles, and Societal Impacts.* Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. http://www.eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/CPDAPA_REVISED_FULL_VERSION.pdf

[iv] Wolf, Alison. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education*. The Stationery Office, TSO

[v] For a fuller discussion of this matter see Raven, J. (2008). Intelligence, engineered invisibility, and the destruction of life on earth. In J. Raven & J. Raven (Eds.) *Uses and Abuses of Intelligence: Studies Advancing Spearman and Raven's Quest for Non-Arbitrary Metrics*. Unionville, New York: Royal Fireworks Press; Edinburgh, Scotland: Competency Motivation Project; Budapest, Hungary: EDGE 2000; Cluj Napoca, Romania: Romanian Psychological Testing Services SRL. (Chapter 19, pp. 431-471). Also available at http://www.eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/UAIChapter19.pdf

[vi] Raven, J., Johnstone, J., & Varley, T. (1985*). Opening the Primary Classroom*. Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education. Actually, there was more than one class and a composite picture was formed for presentational purposes.

[vii] I use the word competencies to refer to emotional predispositions to engage in fairly specific, but complex, activities having cognitive, affective, and conative components in effective ways in a variety of situations.