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100 years of controversy over standards: making sense of the issues

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Abstract

Examinations matter. They matter to students, to teachers, to school administrators, to higher education institutions and employers and to heads of Government. However, the reasons why they matter differ according to which group of users you belong to, and this has implications for the way in which the different groups regard standards in education.

The different purposes to which examination results are put, the method and nature of the assessment and the content of the associated curriculum affect the way that examinations are viewed, and the consequences of this has been arguments about standards, and a great deal of research focussed on comparability.

The 1911 Consultative Committee report (Board of Education, 1911) dealt precisely, and in great detail with many of the same issues which affect us today. Yet, 100 years on, educational researchers are still grappling with them. What has gone on in this time, and why do we persist in addressing an issue which is so elusive and so contentious?

This paper describes the issues which have dominated this area of research for the past century and takes a long hard look at the way in which theories of comparability have developed, different viewpoints have emerged and the effects that potential changes in the future will have on the perceptions of standards in examinations. The paper will trace key developments in the theory, methodology and use of comparability research, as well as briefly describing the core principles upon which much of the work is based.

Finally, consideration will be made of the dilemmas which confront research in this field, notably the ways in which meaningful research can be conducted, and how the results of research studies can usefully inform the wider community of examination users?

References

Board of Education Consultative Committee (1911). Report of the Consultative Committee on examinations in secondary schools. Parliamentary Papers. Session 1911, Vol. XVI, p.159. Chairman: Acland, A. H. Dyke.

