

What's Not on the Test

A conversation with Ms Chan Wan Siong, Principal of Damai Secondary, on the guiding principles behind effective assessment practices.



Last year was ground-breaking for Damai Secondary. After the merger with Bedok North Secondary, the school not only implemented Subject-Based Banding (SBB), but also took the opportunity to review its assessment practices – and removed mid-year exams for Sec 1 to Sec 3, beyond what the Ministry of Education is stipulating today.

Naturally, teachers were concerned about students coping with the changes and demands, and paid greater attention to how they were reaching out to the last student. The year-end results for 2018 provided that much needed relief and validation for their efforts.

“The removal of mid-year exams did not adversely affect students’ progression rates and overall results,” says the new school principal, Ms Chan Wan Siong. “SBB students not only moved on to take those subjects at the next level, some also transferred laterally into the course.”

Crucially, without the mid-year examinations, teachers now had more time for their schemes of work, and more flexibility to try new ideas.

“We saved three to four weeks from having to prepare for exams, conduct the exams and do post-exam analysis,” says Ms Chan. “The attitudes of students also changed. They do take the weighted assessment seriously, but we can now get students to look at studying and learning not from a grade or mark perspective, but whether or not they are preparing themselves well to move on to the next level.”

Contact: What’s in the basket of assessment practices a teacher brings into the classroom?

Ms Chan: It can be questioning techniques during the lesson, for the teacher to gauge whether or not the students are understanding, say, a new concept. By asking questions, and getting students to reflect on what is being taught, that is a kind of assessment. It can also be quizzes that teachers conduct in the interim, as part of the lesson plan. There are ICT tools that allow teachers to capture these responses quickly. It can also be group discussions, after a number of topics or concepts are taught. Assessment is an ongoing process, as part of the teaching and learning.

Of course, written assessment is another way, for instance when homework is assigned at the end of the lesson. However, the task or piece of written work must allow students to use and apply the knowledge that’s learnt, and for the teacher to know whether the majority have gotten the concept.

Contact: What are the supports in place to refresh those practices?

Ms Chan: There are standard courses by MOE that teachers attend. Within the school, we have timetabled time when teachers work with learning communities on tasks, projects or lesson packages they are looking to develop, or a new strategy they want to implement. It’s a weekly thing, so teachers can enact a lesson, try out a method,

and then discuss with their colleagues what worked, or not, and get new ideas.

They might talk about assessment as part of the lesson delivery; about pacing of the lesson and fine-tuning it based on feedback from students’ reactions or responses. We also analyse tests and exam results at the department level.

Contact: How can teachers be more effective in using their assessments formatively?

Ms Chan: It’s a process that the school is working on. Teachers may be used to the old ways of teaching a topic and then testing before going to the next topic, sometimes re-testing. The frequent testing was to ensure we knew whether students are learning, and to prepare them for “The Test” or “The Exam”.

But we want them to move away from that, to really help students understand: What is it they are learning, and why is it important? How does it feature in their lives, in society, and what does it mean to know all these things? Is what they are studying now connected to other subjects and disciplines?

Contact: How do teachers implement this in the classroom?

Ms Chan: When we do our walkabouts, we don’t need a quiet classroom. Sometimes, teachers have the misperception that when the principal walks past, all must be quiet. It’s not true. When there’s discussion, there will be noise, there will be excitement. That’s what we want to see in the classrooms.

Students need to know that learning is about wanting to know more, beyond preparing for a test. It will be a problem

if the test mark becomes the only measure of learning. It is not. When our teachers focus on what makes students interested and motivated to learn, many of them find that class discussions become very rich.

Contact: How do you guide parents who rely on test scores to track their child’s progress?

Ms Chan: Instead of a mid-year exam, we have two weighted assessments, in Term 1 and Term 2. Parents still see marks in the report book, but that’s just one component of assessment. When we conduct Meet-the-Parent sessions in May, we remind parents that we’re not inviting them to collect the report book. Rather, it’s an invitation to have a personal chat with the form teachers, to better understand the progress of their child.

Let us affirm the strengths of the child, and talk about areas the child can work on, and what we can do together to help the child. This conversation happens with the child.

Fundamentally, this also means that teachers must know their students. They must know how to help students not just meet the minimum criteria, but also to go beyond and move on to the next level. **C**

“IT WILL BE A PROBLEM IF THE TEST MARK BECOMES THE ONLY MEASURE OF LEARNING. OUR TEACHERS FOCUS ON WHAT MAKES STUDENTS INTERESTED AND MOTIVATED TO LEARN.”