The Role of Assessment in Professional Work

A common approach to assessment in education is to treat it as something that follows teaching and learning – the role of teachers is to deliver the relevant curriculum; the role of students is to learn; and the role of assessment is to judge how well students have learnt what teachers have taught, and to grade them accordingly. But in many professions, including medicine and psychology, assessments are used not so much to judge as to understand. The role of assessment is to understand the current situation, to identify starting points for action, to monitor improvement over time and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and treatments.

This presentation will focus on the use of assessment for understanding and for informed decision making in professional work. At all levels of education – from students and parents, to teachers, school leaders, system managers and governments – good educational decision making depends on good information about the status quo. Teachers require a good understanding of where individuals are in their learning to provide appropriate teaching and support. In some cases, this may require detailed exploration and diagnosis of the errors that individuals are making or the misunderstandings that they have developed. Governments require a good understanding of current levels of achievement to target educational resources and programs most effectively. At all levels, well-designed educational assessments assist in identifying appropriate interventions and starting points for action.

Professional work also involves monitoring progress over time. Teachers need to be able to monitor the progress that individuals make to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Governments and education systems need to be able to monitor trends in student achievement levels and progress in closing achievement gaps to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and initiatives.

A challenge is to identify and promote excellent practice in using assessment as an integral part of professional educational work.