High stakes testing in a low stakes environment: PIPS Baseline Assessment in Australia

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Abstract

Unlike its international counterparts, Australia has not developed a strong assessment culture among its primary schools. Its current national literacy and numeracy assessment program is requiring significant intervention to support the analysis and interpretation of results at the school and community level. In such a culture, there is evidence of support among practitioners for the use of an entry-level assessment program in both government and non-government primary schools. This paper reports a trial in 2001 of University of Durham’s PIPS Baseline Assessment program in several Australian states. Cultural differences in assessment items, voices, school level support, professional development requirements, and matters of parental interest and concern are reported.

Introduction

In the early years of schooling, Australian primary schools work in a low stakes testing culture. For more than a decade, large-scale State-based literacy intervention programs such as First Steps (EDWA, 1994a, 1994b) have provided teachers with tools for close observation of the development in individual children. The focus of these developmental assessment tools has been on matching observed levels of performance (often constructed in phases of development) with appropriate teaching strategies. Teachers have been encouraged to collect portfolios of work samples and to plot children on developmental continua and performance maps (Masters, 1997). Although the developmental sequences vary from one State to the next, they all aligned with the national statements and profiles developed in the early 1990s (Marsh, 1994). Attempts to develop an agreed National Curriculum from these national curriculum documents were broken on the wheel of States’ rights, in the context of a federal settlement giving constitutional responsibility for education to the States and the lion’s share of taxation income to the national government (Angus & Louden, 1998). State-based assessment programs have provided some links between standardised test performance and the eight levels in each State’s curriculum framework, but the links feed a low-stakes reporting regime. Although all States now provide reports to parents based on Year 3 and Year 5 assessments, these are individual assessment reports. In at least one state, Victoria, the government reporting program contextualises each student’s assessment results with box-and-whisker plots of the whole school cohort, the state cohort and a like-schools cohort. Unlike comparable assessment programs in the United States and the United Kingdom, however, individual schools’ results are not released publicly. School systems have resisted the attempts of newspapers to use freedom of information powers to secure the release of individual school data. Parents cannot consult the Guardian or Tennessean web-page for school league tables, and cannot compare schools using the kinds of public like-schools analyses available in California (http://star.cde.ca.gov/) or value-added analyses available in Tennessee (http://www.k-12.state.tn.us/rptcrd00/).

The combination of a developmental curriculum ideology among early years teachers and a low stakes assessment and reporting framework means that pressures on schools to explore baseline assessments in literacy and numeracy have been weak and indirect. National longitudinal studies of early literacy have followed the progress of children from preschool to school (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 1998). Hill et al (1998) and from the first year of school until the third year of school (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 2001). The Australian Council for Educational Research has developed and trialed a Rasch-based longitudinal assessment instrument with items that span preschool to Year 3, the Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Scale (http://www.acer.edu.au). School systems have used a variety of
developmental approaches to early identification of children expected to have difficulties (Louden, Chan, Elkins, Greaves, House, Milton, Nichols, Rivalland, Rohl & van Krayenroo, 2000). But in addition to these indirect pressures, there now have been three years of whole population literacy and numeracy assessment in Years 3 and 5. In this context, schools and systems have begun to wonder whether there is a place for the kind of start-of-school baseline assessment that is now familiar in the United Kingdom.

For a group of researchers from Edith Cowan University, the authors of this paper, the experience of working with 500 Western Australian government schools to explore the school improvement possibilities opened up by the availability of whole cohort data sharpened the sense that baseline assessment might be useful. In this low-stakes assessment culture, there was deep commitment to improving the outcomes for the children who experience difficulties with early literacy and a broad recognition that children were already on a trajectory of school failure by the time schools received their Year 3 literacy data. Was there a way of identifying children earlier, without confirming them as potential failures at five-years-old? The University of Durham’s PIPS Baseline Assessment seemed an appropriate resource for this purpose, so an Australian trial of the material was planned. This short paper describes the process of establishing an Australian trial, some attempts to make the materials more culturally appropriate, and teachers’ and parents’ reactions to the materials.

**Australian trial**

The PIPS Baseline Assessment trial was conceived as a small trial involving a maximum of 20 government schools in Western Australia (WA). In November 2000 an invitation to participate was extended by Edith Cowan University to Directors of two of the 14 government system education districts in the state. Principals of schools in four other districts asked to be involved. In addition, schools in the independent sector learned of the proposed trial and sought to be involved.

PIPS Baseline Assessment is designed to measure entry-level reading, numeracy and phonological awareness and compare these scores with performance at the end of the year. Entry level is defined as the start of the school year. However, due to technical problems associated with the Australianisation of the PIPS Baseline Assessment materials the WA trial began in the second month of school (March 2001). The forty-one trial schools were offered a half-day of professional development, and paid a fee that covered the cost of materials, administration and professional development.

The PIPS Baseline Assessment is used for Reception students in the UK. Across Australia’s six states and two territories, there is little commonality in age at entry to formal schooling. In an effort to bring some common entry age, WA is increasing the entry age by six months, starting in 2001 in the Pre-primary year. The year of the trial, 2001, is a transition year. All students are now in full time Pre-primary education. For the first time these Pre-primary classes are now incorporated into the primary school structure, on the same site, with the same principal and, in some cases, in multi-aged classes known as P-1 classes. For these reasons, it was decided to trial the PIPS Baseline Assessment in WA in the two age groups: Pre-primary (aged 4 turning 5) and Year 1 (aged 5 turning 6). All schools in the trial chose to assess Year 1 students and approximately one third of the schools elected to assess their Pre-primary students as well as their Year 1 students.

The WA trial included one school in Queensland, an independent school whose principal had heard of the trial and made contact the CEM Centre at the University of Durham who made the link with the trial organisers in WA. This school assessed its Year 1 students only.

Soon the trial grew to include Tasmanian government schools. The Director, Educational Review, Department of Education, Tasmania, learned that a trial of PIPS was being conducted in Australia and asked for the trial to be extended to Tasmania. The Tasmanian Department of Education circulated an expression of interest to all schools in that state. This trial was budgeted to include about 20 schools, but when 48 of the 170 schools in the state responded, it was agreed to include all of them. The trial was offered to only Prep students, that is, students who will be turning 6 this year (2001), and are in a program ‘preparatory’ to the first year of formal
schooling. While this program is similar to the Pre-primary program of WA, the Tasmanian Prep students are up to one year older than WA Pre-primary students are. Tasmanian schools were offered 4.5 days teacher relief and invited to participate in 0.5 day of professional development.

Unlike the WA trial that was offered to schools directly by Edith Cowan University, the Tasmanian trial was run through the state Department of Education. In WA schools found the funds from their own resources. In Tasmania, the Central Department of Education met all costs associated with the trial. Table 1 shows the up-take of schools in the trial.

At the same time that plans were made for the trial of the PIPS materials in WA, a trial was conducted in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This trial involved all schools in the territory’s education system and was centrally funded. However, this ACT trial differed in two key aspects. First, the trial was conducted through the CEM Centre, the University of Durham, not through Edith Cowan University in WA. Second, the ACT schools used the PIPS Baseline Assessment CD-ROM and materials as they were currently used in the UK. All other Australian schools trialed a modified or Australianised version of the PIPS Baseline Assessment materials.

**Australianisation of materials**

Modifications to the PIPS Baseline Assessment materials were made to both the CD-ROM and support documents for teachers. The aim was to ‘Australianise’ these materials.

The first change was to re-record the audio tracks in Standard Australian English. An attempt was also made to record two versions of Australian Aboriginal English. Both voices were selected from within Edith Cowan University’s Indigenous Education unit. One was a local Indigenous person, the other was aimed to represent the northern WA Kimberley Kriol dialect. However, when the recordings were heard by linguists within the university and other Indigenous people, two main concerns were raised. One was a political issue. There are many different Indigenous groups in WA and their accents and modes of expression are not all the same. Selecting one of the many was regarded as disrespectful of the other voices.

The second main concern related to linguistic issues. Indigenous linguistic structures are different from that used in the transcript for the CD-ROM. For example, an Indigenous person may have difficulty responding to a request such as ‘Can you point to some carrots?’ There are many reasons for this. First, the Standard English structure ‘Can you . . .’ is not used. Second, the decontextualised nature of the task would render it a trivial or even ludicrous request. Third, at a pragmatic level, a student was likely to respond: ‘Sure I can do that’ without recognising the need to point to the picture of carrots on the screen. For these reasons, the kinds of questions asked were considered to be culturally inappropriate for using an Indigenous voice. The outcome was that the Aboriginal voices were not used for the CD-ROM and only the Standard Australian English voice was used.

Although there were concerns from WA educators that some of the language being assessed was inappropriate, it was decided to leave unchanged the assessment items until the trial results were known. The one exception was the use of UK coins for which photographs of Australian coins were substituted.

Minor changes were made to the ‘student database page’ of the CD-ROM such as replacing ‘county’ with ‘state’ and replacing ‘pupil’ with ‘student’. The booklet ‘Using the PIPS Baseline Assessment’ was modified to delete all reference to UK policies and practices and to delete particular words such Reception. Other deletions included quotes from parents and teachers who had used the materials in the UK. The booklet supporting the CD-ROM was also changed in similar ways.

**Professional development for teachers and principals**

All principals and teachers in the trial were invited to a half-day professional development workshop. The workshops were held at geographically convenient schools. The purpose of the workshop was to familiarise teachers and principals with the CD-ROM, its content and administration, the time lines for the program and the interpretation of the feedback analysis of data.

Principals were encouraged to attend for three reasons. One reason was that school
level support was needed to administer the assessment, particularly in terms of appropriate computers and adequate time. The other reason was political. Principals are increasingly required to provide school performance data for all students, including pre-primary students. However, there has been no systematic data collection at entry level. The PIPS Baseline Assessment provides data that can be linked with whole school data at later years. It is necessary for principals to understand the nature and form of the data available from the PIPS Baseline Assessment if they are to make use of this in whole school reporting. The third reason was a cultural matter. Traditionally, there has been a gap in understanding between early childhood educators and school administration teams about early childhood pedagogy. The PIPS Baseline Assessment is an intervention with the potential to break down some of the cultural barriers. The assessment data also provides a focal point for discussions between teachers and with members of the administration team.

In WA, the response to the invitation to attend the professional development sessions exceeded expectations. It was anticipated that one teacher from each school and possibly the principal would attend. In the event, all teachers and the principal participated, indicating both the novelty of the assessment program and also its significance to the school community. What was surprising, though, was that the WA schools themselves were able to resource this release of staff for half a day.

At the workshops, each teacher was given a package containing all materials and support documents for the trial, such as parent consent letters, timelines, the CD-ROM, the disk for data and packages for posting the disk, the booklet ‘Using PIPS Baseline Assessment’ and a project evaluation questionnaire.

During the workshop, participants were shown how to enter school, class and student data and how to work through the assessment program. They were also shown examples of the feedback they would receive from the start-of-year and end-of-year assessments. Concepts such as the standardisation of scores, box-and-whisker plots, composite bar graphs, line graphs and regression analysis were illustrated using sample data.

The workshops also provided an opportunity for teachers to meet other teachers in the trial and to build support networks.

Reference Group

In view of the sensitive nature of the issue of assessing students’ literacy and numeracy at entry age, it was decided to set up a Reference group of representatives of a range of stakeholders. The group consists of the Director and Senior Policy Advisor for the Education Department’s Early Childhood Education Branch; the Education Department’s Senior Educational Measurement Officer from the Standards and Effectiveness Branch; four government school principals; one independent school principal; one District Director; two academics with interests in Literacy in the early years; and the three members of the trial project team.

The Reference Group has met twice during the 2001 trial. In the first meeting, an abridged form of the professional development program was presented to the Reference Group so that all members were given an opportunity to become familiar with the CD-ROM, the method of assessment, its content and the kinds of feedback schools would receive. Although concerns were expressed by the early childhood academics and policy makers about the feasibility and validity of assessing students at age 4 or 5, the principals whose teachers were currently using the CD-ROM were outspoken in their support of the assessment program. At the second reference group meeting, teachers and principals involved in the trial were invited to present their experiences of the assessment and their application of the first round of feedback.

Some of the issues debated by the reference group were:

- How applicable are the content and method of the PIPS Baseline Assessment instrument for Australian primary and pre-primary students? Are State and Territory curricular differences accounted for by the materials? Can school organisational structures accommodate the administration of this assessment program?

- To what extent is its applicability a function of the gender, socio-economic background and age of participating students?

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students? In particular, is this assessment method suitable for all students or are some sections of the student population discriminated against by the protocols?

- In what ways are the samples of Australian primary and pre-primary students’ Literacy and Numeracy performance similar to total populations of students in the UK? Are Australian and UK ‘value added’ measures comparable for these samples of students?

Implementation

The trial began with the professional development workshops in WA in March and Tasmania in May 2001. The one Queensland school had access to the package of materials and all the professional development materials and agreed to engage in telephone conversations as needed, due to the high cost of travel.

Schools had short timelines to complete the assessment. In particular, Tasmanian schools were required to complete all assessments within three weeks of the workshop. Cut off dates were met by all schools in both states. All disks were sent to Edith Cowan University and the data transferred electronically to the University of Durham’s CEM Centre for analysis. When the analyses were completed the feedback was transferred electronically to Edith Cowan University, printed and then sent to individual schools.

This process was repeated for the end-of-year assessment.

Evaluation

The trial is designed to find out teachers’ and principals’ responses to using the PIPS Baseline Assessment from an administrative and pedagogical perspective. In addition the trial aims to examine the aggregated data from WA, Queensland and Tasmania to answer questions about the appropriateness of the assessment for all students and comparisons of Australian and UK data.

This paper reports only the first of these three general issues, namely responses from teachers and principals to the first phase of assessment. In the section that follows, data from three sources are discussed: the principal and teacher survey, questions frequently asked by teachers during the implementation, and an unexpected source of data, questions raised by parents.

Teachers’ responses

In the teacher’s survey, teachers were asked a variety of questions concerning the content and administration of the PIPS assessment. Questions concerned the process of the trial, professional development, content of the assessment tool, and the overall rating of the PIPS Baseline Assessment.

The survey was structured to provide mainly quantitative results, which have been analysed with the SPSS program. Four questions allowed teachers to elaborate in a more qualitative manner. For the purposes of this paper, WA and Tasmanian teacher responses have been separated.

WA teachers

The Western Australian teachers survey results are based on 59 surveys from a possible 101. WA teachers accounted for 52.7% of all surveys returned. Two-thirds of the teachers who administered the assessment were Pre primary teachers, and one-third taught Year one classes.

The WA trial’s first assessment block took place between 8 March 2001 and 6 April 2001. The majority of WA teachers were happy with the assessment time, as 76.3% considered it to have been undertaken at the right time of year. Of the 27.1% who thought the assessment should be done earlier, 16.9% thought the beginning of February was the most appropriate time.

By and large, most teachers reported no difficulties with the technical aspects of the assessment. Most (83.1%) had no trouble accessing suitable computers, and most (91.5%) reported no trouble with loading the program on their school's computers.

All but a few teachers (8.5%) were satisfied with the support offered by Edith Cowan University, which consisted of phone, postal and e-mail communication with schools.

Professional development

All teachers and principals were invited to professional development workshops to help them administer the assessment and
interpret the feedback. The majority of WA teachers attended these workshops (74.6%). Most (74.5%) agreed that the administration of the assessment was explained sufficiently, most (74.6%) reported that the CD-ROM was clearly demonstrated, and most (64.4%) agreed the feedback was explained clearly.

Overall, most teachers (64.41%) rated the professional development workshop as very good or good.

**Tool**

The majority of teachers (83.1%) agreed that the assessment was easy to administer. 78% agreed that their students enjoyed working through PIPS.

Most teachers (72.9%) agreed that PIPS gave them valuable insights into their student's development.

There were mixed feeling about the vocabulary items. For example, many thought 'cash' and 'cosmetics' were inappropriate for the Australian setting, and should be amended to test for the items 'money' and 'makeup'. Subsequent comparative analysis of UK and Australian data shows an item difficulty correlation of 0.95 between Australian and U.K. children. In both locations, 'cash' and 'cosmetics' are among the more difficult receptive vocabulary words, and in general Australian and U.K. children found the same words easy or difficult.

Most West Australian teachers agreed that the PIPS assessment is free from bias on the grounds of gender and ethnicity (67.8% and 57.6% respectively). A small group (1.7% for both gender and ethnicity) strongly disagreed.

Again, most teachers agreed that PIPS covered an appropriate range of both Early Literacy and Numeracy concepts (66.1% and 66.1% respectively). Overall, most (76.3%) WA teachers felt that PIPS relates to current system initiatives in Early Literacy and Numeracy.

When asked if PIPS interfered with their classroom management, half disagreed. However, about one-quarter (23.7%) agreed that it did interfere. This data shows the different ways in which schools supported their staff during the administration of the assessment. Some provided teacher relief, while other classrooms had to manage the logistics without added support.

Time is always an important variable for teachers. Many teachers expressed concern at the workshops that the 20 minutes advised for each assessment would not be enough. The survey results for WA show that most teachers (64.4%) agree that 20 minutes was adequate. However, some (13.6%) disagreed. This may have been due to the unavailability of administrative support for entering school and student data.

For the overall rating of the CD-ROM assessment tool, most (79.7%) rated it as very good or good. Some (10.2%) rated it as OK and fewer (1.7%) as very poor.

**Feedback**

More than three-quarters of teachers agreed that the student and class feedback was useful. Most believed (72.9%) that the feedback clearly showed the individual performance of their students. Over three-quarters of teachers (79.7%) stated that they used this feedback to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual students.

Nearly half of all WA teachers (42.4%) reported that they used the feedback to group their students for teaching, half (50.8%) agreed it helped them identify students at risk, and over half (57.6%) agreed they utilised the feedback to set targets.

However, there was some dissatisfaction with the feedback. One-quarter (25.4%) of teachers disagreed that they used the feedback to group students for teaching. Nearly one-fifth (17%) disagreed that they used the feedback to identify students at risk, and 15.3% disagreed that they used the feedback to set targets. Some of this dissatisfaction with the feedback may be due to expectations of what the feedback should do.

For example, from the written comments in the survey it is possible to identify two attitudes held by some teachers. Some expressed the belief that the feedback "told them nothing they did not already know" about their students. Others saw the feedback as confirming their beliefs. These two responses show how differently the feedback can be perceived based on the attitude of the teacher.
Overall, three-quarters (69.5%) rated the feedback as good; a small group (10%) rated it as poor.

Most (69.5%) WA teachers rated their overall experience of the PIPS assessment process as good, while only a small proportion (6.8%) rated it poor.

**Tasmanian teachers**

Tasmanian teacher survey results are based on 53 responses from a possible 78. Tasmanian teachers made up 47.3% of all teacher responses. Tasmania tested only their Prep classes (students turning 6 in 2001), therefore nearly half (44.6%) of all teachers who assessed were Tasmanian Prep teachers.

The PIPS assessment was conducted between 14 May 2001 and 31 May 2001, several weeks later than in WA. A majority (86.8%) of Tasmanian teachers did not believe the assessment was conducted at the right time of year. The majority who believed it should be conducted earlier (84.9%) gave March as their preferred time (54.7%).

As with WA teachers, most Tasmanian teachers encountered few problems with the technical requirements of the assessment. Only one-tenth (9.4%) of teachers reported problems accessing suitable computers, compared with the majority (90.6%) who did not. Most (96.2%) reported no difficulties loading the PIPS software.

The same modes of communication were available to Tasmanian schools as were to WA schools. Most (90.6%) teachers were satisfied with Edith Cowan University support.

**Professional development**

Of all the teachers who responded to the survey, over three-quarters (88.7%) were able to attend the workshops in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie, Tasmania. Of those in attendance, less than half (45.3%) agreed that the administration of the assessment was explained sufficiently. Most (90.6%) Tasmanian teachers agreed that the CD-ROM was clearly demonstrated. Well over three-quarters (88.7%) agreed that the feedback was explained clearly at the workshops.

In all 3 questions, Tasmanian teachers rated the workshops higher than WA teachers did. Tasmanian teachers were given a 3-hour workshop, whereas WA teachers had 2.5 hours.

Overall, close to half (45.3%) rated the workshops as very good, and one-third (35.8%) rated it as good.

**Tool**

As with WA, most (92.4%) Tasmanian teachers found the assessment easy to administer. Most (96.2%) also believed their students enjoyed the assessment process.

Two-thirds (69.8%) of Tasmanian teachers felt the PIPS assessment provided them with valuable insights into their student's ability, while some (13.2%) disagreed.

There were similar feelings in Tasmania about the issue of vocabulary. One-third (32.1%) agreed the terminology used caused confusion for their students, while just over one-third (39.7%) disagreed. Not only are UK and Australian students finding the same words challenging, but Tasmanian and WA teachers are sharing some of the same concerns.

Most teachers in Tasmania thought the assessment was free from gender and ethnic bias (69.8% and 66% agreeing respectively). Some did however disagree for ethnicity (3.8%).

Tasmanian teachers believed the PIPS assessment spanned an appropriate range of Early Literacy and Numeracy concepts. Over three-quarters (81.1%) agreed the literacy range was relevant. The figures for numeracy show similar feelings, with over three-quarters (79.3%) again agreeing. As with WA, some (9.4%) teachers did not consider the literacy range appropriate while the same number (9.4%) of teachers disagreed the numeracy range was adequate. By and large, the majority (71.7%) of Tasmanian teachers felt that the assessment related to the current system Early Literacy and Numeracy initiatives operational in their State.

Given that all Tasmanian schools in the PIPS trial received 4.5 days teacher relief through their State Education Department, it is not surprising that over half (56.6%) disagreed that their classroom management was
disrupted. However, some (18.9%) agreed that PIPS interfered with their classroom management. A contributing factor could have been the limited timeframe (3 weeks) that teachers had to complete the assessment.

Most (84.9%) teachers agreed that 20 minutes was adequate time for the assessment of each of their students. This means about 20% more Tasmanian teachers than WA thought the time sufficient.

Over three-quarters (79.2%) of teachers rated the CD-ROM tool overall as very good and good, while some (3.8%) rated it as poor. This is on par with WA teachers’ ratings. However, more Tasmanian teachers rated the CD-ROM as poor than did their WA colleagues (3.8% compared with 1.7%).

Feedback

The survey shows that Tasmanian teachers felt much the same way about the usefulness of the printed feedback as did WA teachers. The majority (81.1%) of Tasmanian teachers agreed that the student and class reports were beneficial. A similar number from both states disagreed the feedback was of use (5.7% for Tasmanian and 5.1% for WA), while no one from Tasmania strongly disagreed compared with 3.4% from WA.

The bulk of Tasmanian teachers strongly agreed the feedback clearly showed their student’s individual performance (88.6%). Nearly two-thirds (62.3%) of teachers strongly agreed the feedback helped them recognise areas of strength and weakness in each student.

Over one-third (39.6%) of Tasmanian teachers stated they used feedback to group students, while nearly half (47.5%) of WA teachers agreed. Most Tasmanian teachers agreed that they used PIPS feedback to identify students at risk (50.9%) and to set targets (41.5%), though over one-third (39.6%) disagreed.

On the whole, most teachers rated the feedback as good (50.9%), and very good (26.4%). Only some (3.8%) rated it as poor.

When asked to rate their overall experience of the PIPS Baseline Assessment, most (75.5%) teachers were happy with it. However, a few (3.8%) considered their experience poor.

**Principals’ responses**

Principals were asked a variety of questions concerning the process of the trial, professional development, content of the assessment tool, and the overall rating of the PIPS Baseline Assessment.

As with the teacher’s surveys, these questions were structured to provide mainly quantitative results, with some opportunity for written comment. Selections of the results are discussed below.

**WA Principals**

Nearly half (49.2%) of principal surveys returned were from WA principals. The majority of respondents were principals (71%) as opposed to being acting or deputy principals while some (12.9%) were Heads of Primary. All Heads were from the 10 independent schools that participated.

It was pleasing that just under half of all WA principals attended the professional development workshop (41.9%), as a point of emphasis in the workshop was the importance of principals understanding the needs of early years educators.

As mentioned above, three-quarters (76.3%) of WA teachers believed the assessment was conducted at the right time of year. However, not even one-quarter (22.6%) of their principals agreed. Most principals preferred it to be done earlier, with nearly one-quarter (22.6%) stating the beginning of February, and the beginning March (25.8%) as their preferred time.

Most principals (93.5%) reported no trouble accessing suitable computers, with similar numbers (96.8%) stating they had no difficulty loading the required software. The majority (87.1%) were satisfied with support offered through Edith Cowan University.

Overall, WA principals enjoyed their experience with PIPS, with over three-quarters rating it as good. When asked to give an overall rating of the professional development workshops, most (71%) said it was good. Most (74.2%) also rated the CD-ROM as good, and over three-quarters (77.4%) rated the feedback as good.
Tasmanian Principals

Half (50.8%) of the respondents were from Tasmania, with a small number (6.3%) of deputy principals completing the survey.

Just over 20% more Tasmanian principals than WA principals attended the workshops provided (68.8%) which again was pleasing.

Interestingly, Tasmanian principals and teachers are also in disagreement over the timing of the assessment. While the majority of Tasmanian teachers felt it was conducted at the wrong time (86.8%), over two-thirds (68.8%) of their principals considered it the right time. In both states there seems to be a difference of opinion between the classroom and administration as to the right time for assessment. Of those principals who did not agree with the timing, two-thirds (31.2%) wanted it in early February and February.

Most (81.3%) Tasmanian principals reported no difficulty accessing suitable computers, and about the same number (84.4%) had no trouble loading the software. As with WA, most principals were satisfied with the support available through Edith Cowan University (78.1%).

When asked to rate their overall experience, most (71.9%) Tasmanian principals said the workshops were good. Nearly all (90.7%) rated the CD-ROM as good and very good, and a large number (78.1%) considered the feedback good also. Some (6.3%) felt it was poor. Their overall experience with all facets of the assessment was mainly very good and good (37.5% and 62.5%).

Teachers’ frequently asked questions

What was surprising to the project team was the nature and frequency of questions asked by teachers involved in the trial. Many of the questions were asked by telephone and e-mail, although some were brought up by teachers and principals at the professional development workshops. The strategy adopted to deal with questions from teachers was to seek answers where necessary from relevant personnel at the University of Durham CEM Centre and to circulate a newsletter containing answers to all teachers through their principals. In the section that follows, the issues are grouped into technical issues, communication, and interpretation of feedback.

Three main technical issues emerged. The first related to the CD-ROM itself. Teachers noticed that it was not possible to enter into student data both the ESL status and the sex of a student. This was an error that occurred in the CD-ROM program when the Australian modifications were made. The solution was to apply a ‘patch’. The CEM Centre made a patch available on their web-site to be downloaded onto the PIPS program. Schools were asked to do this. However when the data were analysed it appeared that only two of the 91 schools had done so.

Computers require Internet Explorer version 4 or higher to run the CD-ROM. Old software produced sound problems such as jumping. If this version was not already installed, teachers could download it from the PIPS CD. Teachers reported sound problems even with the updated software.

Teachers were concerned about the use of networked computers and the likelihood of retaining confidentiality of data. Teachers also raised questions about loosing data when networks were periodically cleaned up or ‘ghosted’ as was a common practice in some schools.

The second set of technical issues related to the use of protocols. Teachers needed clarification of a number of the protocols. For example, they wanted to know how many times, and after what length of time, they should use the ‘replay audio’ button when testing students. Teachers were also unsure of the extent to which they should prompt students. A particular example was the naming of letters. Some WA teachers argued that because they taught students using ‘Letterland’ strategies such as associating a letter’s name with an image or a sound, students should be marked correct if they knew the name of the image or sound associated with it (for example, ‘sammy snake’ for the letter s).

A third technical issue related to the performance of gifted students. Some teachers of gifted students were concerned that their students would answer all questions correctly at the start of the year and therefore show no ‘value added’ by the end of the year. These teachers needed to be reassured that of 70,345 UK students only 271 had reached the most difficult ‘walking to school’ section at all and, of these 271 students, only six had scored full marks.
Communication was a problem, both within schools and also between schools, the trial project team and the CEM Centre. The trial highlighted gaps in communication at the school level. Information to teachers was sent electronically to principals because many of the teachers did not have access to e-mail. That many questions continued to be asked by teachers even after answers had been provided through principals suggested that principals were not passing on information to teachers. A common occurrence was that teachers asked questions for which answers had already been supplied in the materials provided at the workshop. Teachers seemed to prefer to ring up rather than read the supporting materials to find answers.

Time differences between all sites involved in the trial caused communication difficulties. Communication between the Edith Cowan University trial base and the CEM Centre at the University of Durham was impeded by the 8 hour time difference between the west coast of Australia and the UK. This delay was compounded by the 3 hour time difference between the west coast of Australia and Tasmanian and Queensland schools on the east coast of Australia. Some of the earlier technical issues that needed clarification were frustratingly delayed by the need to mediate new technical questions raised by teachers with technical support staff at the University of Durham who themselves were not always clear about the problem to be resolved.

Although the interpretation of feedback was discussed at length at the professional development workshops, teachers most frequently asked: ‘What are the scores out of?’ and ‘What is the highest score my students could have achieved?’ These questions indicated that teachers were accustomed to closed testing, where students where scored out of a theoretical perfect score. These questions also indicated that teachers were seeking some point of reference for their students’ scores. Teachers were not familiar with the use or meaning of standardised scores. Neither the sample of WA schools in the trial are not known to be representative of the whole population of WA schools, nor is the sample of Tasmanian schools known to be representative of all Tasmanian schools. Therefore, no inference could be drawn about a given school’s performance in relation to the respective state or the Australian population.

Another matter relating to the interpretation of feedback concerned taking account of students’ ages. Students assessed varied in age from recently turned four years to over six years. Teachers were reassured that the differences in age could be accounted for. The standardised scores are presented uncorrected for age (or anything else). The rule of thumb for age corrections is that every month age difference corresponds to one point of standardised score. Therefore, in relation to the average student, the older students are six points lower and the younger students six points higher on age-corrected scores.

Parents’ questions

An unexpected element of the trial was the number and nature of questions raised by parents. Because the trial is a research project of Edith Cowan University consent is required from all parents and guardians before students could be assessed. In conjunction with the request for consent was a letter to parents outlining the purpose and nature of the trial. This contact with parents resulted in 15 different questions.

The most common questions were whether parents were to receive a copy of the feedback. However, the following list gives an indication of the range of interests that parents of these students have in their children’s early education. These are summaries of the questions asked:

- How is the program run?
- How long does each session take to complete?
- What time is each session going to take place?
- What is the real purpose of assessing indicators at pre-primary level when at the first parent-teacher meeting the teacher said that the school does not follow any set program?
- Is the data collected used to improve students’ educational program?
- What sort of confidence can be gained in the test from just two readings (March and November)?
- How are the children made aware of the fact that they are being tested using a computer program and not just having fun with it?
Some parents misunderstood the assessment program. For example, one parent asked how often her daughter would be expected to come for the program. Others questioned the methodology used. One couple said that they believed the teacher not the child was being assessed because the teacher was interpreting what the child says. They claimed that ‘the whole process sounds like the Facilitated Communication controversy that emerged some years ago regarding autistic children’. Another parent claimed to be ‘incensed that the education department was spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on inane project when the Australian people clearly do not believe in what the government is doing’.

Other parents reflected a caution that teachers may have been feeling. Here is an e-mail message received from such a parent:

hi i recieved the information about pips and thought it was ok not realy understanding it but was going to enquire. i have children in pre-school, dropping the kids off at school the other day, my teacher in a very strange way and very ‘quietly’, not to permit my children to go ahead with it..i since have talked to a teacher at a other school and i would like to go ahead with it. my questions; do i see the results, are you checking up on the teachers to see if they are doing the right thing by my children, or to see if the school is appropriate to be educating my children. im just trying to find out why this teacher was so against it. thankyou for ur time, hope to hear back. Tracy

The range of issues may illustrate the parents’ general lack of confidence in assessing their students’ performance so early in their school career. The issues may also reflect teachers’ own concerns about the assessment program. On the other hand, these questions may simply indicate the high level of interest that parents have in everything that happens to their children.

2002 and beyond

The interest among WA schools in baseline data continues to grow. The final decision about the future use of the PIPS Baseline Assessment in Tasmanian government schools has not been made. The decision about the future use of PIPS Baseline Assessment in ACT government schools is currently being made.

Although we expect that the pressure for schools to report their performance in terms of ‘value added’ will grow, the future use of PIPS Baseline Assessment in Australia is not clear. Systems have choices: using PIPS as it stands; using a modified Australian PIPS; using an alternative such as LLANS (Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study) developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research; or developing their own. Although state education systems have a historical preference for producing their own assessment programs, these are expensive and time-consuming resources to develop. In the case of school entry baseline assessment, at least in some states, schools’ interest in having access to a program is running ahead of systems’ capacity to provide an appropriate home-grown assessment program. In this context, a more contextually relevant version of the current PIPS program seems a strong option for Australian schools.

References


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