Assessment in school-based education is often seen as an entirely additional activity, added to the ‘real’ education that goes on within schools. Assessment is seen as being completed for outsiders (auditors, inspectors, school managers, exam boards) and, therefore, as helping create a performative culture, a culture where the whole child, and the whole teacher, are reduced to a standardized number. This is a popular and dangerous idea, dangerous in itself, and dangerous in its disparaging of assessment. There is another account of assessment, though: as a dialogic process in which adults and children treat each other as persons, not merely as performers “for the English to see” (www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/37/messages/200.html, explained further in this chapter). It is an account of holistic assessment, in which assessment promotes individuality, community, and the spirit of the school. This chapter explains why both accounts of assessment are alive and well in schools and, to a certain extent, in scholarly literature. It argues for holistic assessment as entirely possible within conventional mainstream education. Not just possible, but necessary: necessary even for those under pressure to gain the very highest grades.

Well-intentioned and carefully organized holistic education can be undermined if assessment is not considered as integral to the system. And avoiding assessment altogether is not an option, as learning of all kinds is completed in dialogue: it is in dialogue that the value of learning, and learning of value, takes place. This chapter, therefore, begins with the corruption of assessment.

The Corruption of Assessment

Educational assessment has a history as long as formal education, and perhaps longer. The word assessment derives from the Latin meaning of sitting beside someone (OED, 2005). Etymology is not the best guide to current meaning, but the idea of sitting beside someone in order to understand what they know, understand, and can do, and what will help with further learning, is a refreshing ‘new’ idea that is carried in the very history of assessment. Sadly, the history of assessment practices in schools has been more problematic. Some of the intentions of assessment have been distorted or corrupted by educational policies, and assessment itself is sometimes used to distort or corrupt other aspects of education. However, understanding assessment starts with understanding its forms and its many purposes. All assessment involves making a judgment or determining a value of someone or something. In education, forms of assessment include criterion-referenced (assessing according to an independent set of criteria), norm-referenced (assessing performance according to the performance
of other people, whether it is better or worse or the same as the ‘norm’), summative (assessing the value of a whole set of work or study), formative (assessing something in order to influence the next period of learning), ipsative (assessing a person or a person’s work according to that person’s previous performance, is it improving, worsening, or just the same?). These forms also imply some purposes, the purpose of ipsative assessment includes judging improvement (or worsening) of performance, and so on. But there are always other possible purposes. Assessment may be used to judge a person, or to judge a person’s work. It may be used to judge a teacher (as a person), or to judge teaching (and its effectiveness). Increasingly, assessment is used to judge schools, or groups of schools, or national education systems.

None of the various forms or purposes of assessment is inherently appropriate or inappropriate, ethical or unethical. The first decision, then, in the assessment of assessment, is what the purpose of schooling is: what are schools primarily for? Many would say that schools are primarily intended to help children learn, but even that relatively uncontroversial statement poses further questions. If schools are intended to help children learn to be “better people” (Noddings, in Stern, 2016, p. 29), then assessment can be judged according to its contribution to this aim. If schools are intended help children learn that life is a battle for survival in which only the strongest thrive, then assessment can be judged quite differently. For this chapter, given that it is within a handbook of holistic education, the first of those two purposes of schooling will be followed (see Stern, 2009, 2018). School-based assessment will be judged according to its contribution to the holistic development of children, attempts to “nurture the development of the whole person”, including “the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual” aspects of the person (Miller, in Miller et al., 2005, p. 2).

Once this assumption is made (that schooling is primarily intended to help children learn to be ‘better people’, across all dimensions of personhood), then there are various ways in which assessment can corrupt or be corrupted. Criterion-referenced assessment can and usually does involve criteria that assess only a narrow range of children’s knowledge, understanding, and skills. If such assessment is treated as though it were a comprehensive assessment of the ‘whole child’, rather than an assessment of only some aspects, then the pupils and teachers alike will be downplaying or ignoring significant qualities. Schools may be expected to promote social skills, and moral and spiritual development (which is a statutory requirement in UK schools, Education Act 1944, section 7, p. 4, although it has never been systematically assessed), but if these qualities are not assessed, there is a danger that other qualities (more easily ‘testable’ qualities) will take precedence (Gipps, 1994; see also Gipps & Murphy, 1994; Stobart & Gipps, 1997). This is not to say that it would be easy to assess social, moral, and spiritual qualities.

Norm-referenced assessment presents a different range of challenges and possible corruptions. Comparing children to other children, and placing them at, above, or below a ‘norm’ is problematic in a number of ways. There is a tendency for such assessment to label children, that is, to give children the sense that they, not just their work at this moment, have been judged. ‘Sub-normal’ judgments can give children the sense that they are ‘sub-normal’ and that this is a permanent condition. Harm can be done if children are labeled as ‘sub-normal’ and that this is a permanent condition. Harm can be done if children are labeled as ‘super-normal’, too; this may be the basis for distorted feelings of superiority towards other children, with dangerous consequences. Additional problems include the lack of substance in norm-referenced assessment; it judges performance according to other performance, not according to any absolute criteria. In a class full of composers, if Chopin, say, were in a class in between Mozart and Beethoven, Chopin might get a sense of being ‘sub-normal.’ This is likely to make him believe (wrongly) that his achievements are of little or no value. That is an implausible example, of course, but in school systems that group pupils by achievement, there is a tendency for most of those in the highest group to judge themselves as inadequate because they fall behind the very ‘top’ achievements in that group. Norm-referencing makes for people always feeling compared, rather than feeling valued in themselves. There are some absurdities in norm-referenced assessment, too. Moss reports a recent discussion of school inspection at the UK parliament’s education select committee, involving the then secretary of state for education, Michael Gove:
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Chair: if ‘good’ requires pupil performance to exceed the national average, and if all schools must be good, how is this mathematically possible?

Michael Gove: by getting better all the time.

(Moss, 2016, p. 937)

That was not an isolated comment. A previous UK secretary of state for education, John Patten, complained publicly that too many schools and too many pupils were “below average” (www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-views/student-self-esteem-sacrificed-for-standards), and introduced ‘league tables’ of schools to address this mathematically absurd ‘problem.’ The league tables were real, of course, and they continue to corrupt education in the UK.

Summative assessment involves judging a whole set of work or study, and this is often completed at the end of a stage of learning. Problems arising from ‘fixing’ an achievement at one point in time derive from the fact that people are constantly learning and developing. Any summative assessment that leads to significant effects on a person’s life chances will be problematic because it assumes a single judgment is valid across time. End-of-school summative assessments in particular are likely to affect progression to work or further study, with impacts on earnings and other life chances for many years to come, along with profound effects on the self-worth and psychological well-being of those receiving the judgments. Notwithstanding the common view that teenage years are a time when people are poor at long-term planning, summative assessment during those years can affect the rest of those teenagers’ lives. This is a distorting impact of summative assessment as it is currently used. It is worth noting, again, that there is nothing inherently damaging in summative assessment, or of any other form of assessment; it is how the assessment is managed and used that can be corrupting.

The explicit development of ‘formative’ assessment was intended in large part to counter the potentially harmful effects of summative assessment. Of course, formative assessment (explaining how a child is doing in order to guide future learning) is as old as any form of assessment, and harkens back to the etymological origin of the word assessment as ‘sitting beside’ someone. The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) of the mid-1990s onwards was particularly influential on formative assessment, redescribing it as ‘assessment for learning’ and combining formative with ipsative assessment, centered on pupil progression. Studying the detailed practice of assessment, “inside the black box” (ARG, 1999; Black & Wiliam, 1998a,b; see also Brookhart, 2013; Moss & Brookhart, 2009, 2012), this group provided research evidence that if teachers wanted their pupils to maximize their performance, then formative assessment could be one of the most important teaching tools. “The value that assessment can have in the process of learning as well as for grading work and recording achievement has been widely recognised” (ARG, 1999, p. 2), they said, but there has been “insufficient use made of assessment and national testing as a means of evaluating learning and teaching and of matching work to pupils’ needs” and “[t]he use of assessment information for discussing progress with pupils... was not widespread” (ARG, 1999, p. 3). Harmful uses of assessment were listed as:

• a tendency for teachers to assess quantity of work and presentation rather than the quality of learning;
• greater attention given to marking and grading, much of it tending to lower the self-esteem of pupils, rather than to providing advice for improvement;
• a strong emphasis on comparing pupils with each other [i.e. ‘normative assessment’] which demoralises the less successful learners;
• teachers’ feedback to pupils often serves social and managerial purposes rather than helping them to learn more effectively;
• teachers not knowing enough about their pupils’ learning needs.

(ARG, 1999, p. 4)
Instead, to improve learning, teachers should concentrate on these ‘deceptively simple’ factors:

- the provision of effective feedback to pupils;
- the active involvement of pupils in their own learning;
- adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment;
- a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning;
- the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

(ARG, 1999, p. 4)

Influential as this group of researchers is, formative and ipsative assessment do not ameliorate all the damage that can be done by other forms of assessment. In the first place, it says nothing of the criteria used for assessment, and so it is as open as any other form of assessment is to partiality in the choice of criteria. A second problem is that formative feedback and summative feedback are not necessarily complementary. If schools are still required to grade pupils (perhaps for the sake of school targets or external auditors, whether or not this is beneficial to pupils), then no amount of ungraded feedback (as recommended by the research on formative assessment) will ungrade schooling. In the US, Kohn (2010) has written of moving from ‘degrading’ schooling to ‘de-grading’ schooling, with the same concerns and the same hopes as those in the Assessment Reform Group. This concern over the potential damage done by some forms of assessment, the damage done even to the final summative grades of the pupils, has been described for a number of years. In 1964, the Scottish educational philosopher Macmurray wrote of the time he was concerned about the effects of examinations on schools, and the reason why reform of assessment was so difficult.

I took every opportunity to consult with teachers. ‘Don’t you find,’ I would ask, ‘that the examination system frustrates your efforts to educate your pupils?’ Mostly I got an affirmative answer. Whereupon I would go on: ‘Then let’s get rid of it.’ Astonishingly often the reply was, ‘Oh! but you can’t do that!’

Why not? If examinations frustrate education, why can’t we stop them? . . . The only answer that I can find is that we are afraid to. Fear has been, from the beginning, one of the major forces in human society.

(Macmurray, 1979, p. 13)

The fear described by Macmurray is the fear of staff not being able to show what they have been doing, the fear of being judged poorly because they refuse to judge others. Fear besets assessment. As Boud says, “assessment hurts, it is uncomfortable and most of us have been deeply touched by it” (quoted in Stobart, 2008, p. 185), and something as uncomfortable as this all too easily creates fear. Fear is not a necessary corollary of assessment, but it is common, especially where people are judged rather than work, and where the consequences of the assessment of performance overshadow the learning itself. “When the classroom culture focuses on rewards, ‘gold stars,’ grades, or class ranking”, according to Black and Wiliam, “pupils look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than to improve their learning” (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, p. 143, see also Clarke, 2001 on the damage done to the ‘learning culture’ of the school by external rewards). A pupil who values learning history, say, may find an assessment process somewhat fearful, but if the learning of history is itself the main purpose of history lessons, then the fear of assessment will be much smaller than if history lessons are entirely directed towards successful grades. A US middle school teaching pupils aged 11 to 14 currently (at the time of writing) has on its website “[o]ur number one priority . . . is to help our students gain essential skills to master all Standardized Assessment tests.” (The name of the school has been withheld, even though the statement was on a public website: there is such pressure on...
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schools to focus to this degree on test results, that a Principal honest enough to put this on the school website should not be labeled for having done so.) In such conditions, assessment is more than likely to induce fear in the school staff and, in consequence, in the pupils, too. Noddings is one of many writers who “argue[s] against an education system that put too much emphasis on academic achievement defined in terms of test scores” (Noddings, 2005, p. xiii).

Assessment can, therefore, corrupt, by distorting the views of pupils and teachers, and can be corrupted, in turn, by external targets and performativity (Ball, 2003). Performativity moves pupils and teachers away from being concerned with the learning itself, and towards thinking only of the extrinsic rewards or punishments arising from the assessment systems. Learning is merely performed ‘for the English to see’, a Portuguese phrase (‘só para inglês ver’, www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/37/messages/200.html) originating in the nineteenth century when English boats policed the Atlantic to stop the slave trade. The English were not particularly interested in stopping the trade, but colluded with other vessels (including Portuguese vessels) to pretend that there was no trade being carried out. So, ‘for the English to see’ refers to a performance that is not sincere and does not reflect the real situation, but allows the continuation of a corrupt system. For those interested in holistic education and concerned with such corrupting influences of assessment, is there an approach to assessment that can overcome some, if not all, of these negative qualities? Is the only option to abolish assessment? The following section attempts to answer those questions.

Holistic Assessment

This section can begin with a quick answer to the question about whether assessment in schools should be abolished. The answer is ‘no’: avoiding assessment altogether is not an option. Recognising the distinctive forms of learning that take place in schools with professional teaching and formal learning, this is a process that will inevitably involve some kind of assessment. It is certainly possible to learn informally without any recognisable assessment. Many young children learn their first language without such assessment: although some adults regularly correct their children’s developing language and provide informal assessment (‘you shouldn’t say that!’), much of the time, most children listen, copy, learn, make mistakes, listen, copy, learn, make fewer mistakes, and so on, in a gradually widening circle of language users. Most learn to make friends, and learn, later in life, to make love, unassessed, one hopes. It is not that language and friendship cannot be assessed. Even levels of spiritual development can be assessed: such assessment is regularly done in the appointment of religious ministers and, more rarely, the nomination of gurus and saints. But schooling, with its professionalised teaching and learning processes, has always involved assessment, even if it is the formative and ipsative assessment carried out by sitting beside pupils, encouraging and guiding successful learning, and providing alternatives to misguided or blocked learning. Such assessment, at the very least, is of the very character of professional teaching. But can assessment in school avoid or overcome the corrupting influence of assessment described in the previous section?

Barrow provides one response: “It is not perhaps that we need to do away with assessment, so much as that we need to become less hypnotised by the results of assessment” (Barrow, 1981, p. 197). Those committed to holistic education can do more than this. They can develop holistic approaches to assessment, and can thereby, at least to a degree, ameliorate the negative influence of other forms of assessment. The starting point is how teachers can sit beside, rather than ‘loom over’, their pupils. This is a matter of dialogue. The philosopher Buber describes three types of dialogue: there is genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them;
There is “technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding”; and there is monologue disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources.

(Buber, 2002, p. 22)

All three types of dialogue can be spoken or written, and can be expressed in smiles and frowns as well as in language; and all three types have a part to play in the process of assessment. Technical dialogue is vital: the exchange of information that is needed by learners and teachers, the accurate correction of errors, the information about how further progress might be made, the accounts of useful sources to be used. All are important to learning. However, if assessment is restricted to technical matters, teachers and pupils will not be using the full range of dialogue opportunities, and the discussions will not engage them as ‘whole’ people. Genuine dialogue, also referred to by Buber as ‘real’ dialogue (Buber, 2002, p. 22), engages the whole person, it involves an imaginative leap to the reality of the other person, what Buber calls “imagining the real” or Realphantasie (Buber, 1998, p. 71).

In assessment talk (including written ‘talk’), pupils recognize the difference between teachers who are really in dialogue with them, and those who have only technical information to give. (Pupils want and need technical information, but they need more than just this.) And pupils recognize, too, those teachers who are not in dialogue at all, in their assessment communication: those who are going through the motions, who are not engaging at all, those who exhibit monologue disguised, sometimes very thinly disguised, as dialogue. It is in dialogue that the value of learning, and learning of value, takes place, and here I want to provide some examples from research in the USA, UK, and Sweden to illustrate the possibility and value of assessment dialogue that is really dialogic. The first account is from the research of Geiger, which took place in three Episcopal high schools (for pupils aged 14–18) in the USA (Geiger, 2015, 2016a,b, 2018). Based on earlier research (e.g., Stern, 2007; Stern & Backhouse, 2011), Geiger wanted to create a consciously dialogic process of “notebooking”, in which teachers and pupils continued a written conversation about an initial piece of work by the pupils. The process was described as a “safe relational space for developing self-conscious agency” (Geiger, 2018, p. 20), and Geiger interviewed both pupils and teachers to explore their views on the notebooking project. What he found was that “[n]umerous students . . . spoke of putting forward a persona, a mask, in school in order to get a good grade”, while “their teachers did not realize the students were putting forth an insincere self-expression and engaging with course content inauthentically” (Geiger, 2016b, pp. 506–507). One teacher within Geiger’s project “said that he felt ‘privileged’ to be privy to the students’ personal appropriation of RE content”, and yet one of his pupils “state[d] bluntly in an interview that she and her classmates were ‘faking it’” because they did not believe the teacher was genuinely interested in what they said (Geiger, 2016b, p. 507). This highlights the importance of dialogue itself, and not just a pedagogic approach that involves teachers and pupils communicating with each other. Pupils can recognize the difference between genuine dialogue and monologue disguised as dialogue. Positive feedback from another pupil was in this form:

He . . . wrote basically a page back, and it’s very personal. He talks about his own religion, and how he follows God. That he had his own falling out with religion, too. So I think it’s nice to hear that feedback and how “I can identify,” or “I agree with you in some ways,” and in other ways he says, “I feel this way, you might feel this way.” But its nice to know that you have that, sort of . . . he’s not like, “oh, good job!”

(Geiger, 2015, original ellipses)
It is worth noting that the teacher was not agreeing with the pupil: he was admired for being in dialogue about the work, not simply saying ‘good job.’ Some schools may think that the only way to help pupils is to indiscriminately praise them, while this pupil notes that disagreement is one of the signs of dialogue. Geiger said that his approach did not work with all teachers or with all pupils, but that when it worked, it worked because of the recognition of real dialogue.

I am not proposing that the reflective and relational practice of notebooking is a fool-proof way to get students to engage in RE non-deceptively. The research suggested, however, that when teachers invited students into reflection through relational feedback, students ruminated on course content and personal spiritual/religious identity matters more thoroughly than when teachers lacked relationality.

(Geiger, 2016b, p. 516.)

Within the UK, research with pupils aged 9–10 (along with teachers, university student teachers, and university tutors) asked them to evaluate examples of written assessment feedback, using analytical categories of how the teacher feedback brought (other) people into the conversation, how it involved treating people as individuals (as ends in themselves), how it involved magnanimity, how it enabled friendship to thrive, how it promoted real dialogue, and how it helped create meanings, things, and people (Stern & Backhouse, 2011, p. 332). One pupil said “nice comments i am proud of this work” and another said “I feel proud of this comment”, while another said “the things that the teacher said makes the child want to improve.” In contrast, some felt ‘left out’ by comments: “I thought it was a good piece of work and she [the teacher] hasn’t marked anything (both pages).” A pupil said that the teacher’s comments were “shamed/upsetting”, another said “the teacher is very harsh and upsetting the pupil” (Stern & Backhouse, 2011, p. 341). “All she has done”, said one pupil, “is marked mistakes agine!!!”, while another said that “Pointing out mooor spellings mistakes makes me feel very bad inside” (Stern & Backhouse, 2011, p. 342). “Please say why you like it!” was the plaintive comment from another pupil (Stern & Backhouse, 2011, p. 343). What this research indicated is that the ‘ordinary’ written feedback on pupil work, in contrast to the distinctive set-up of Geiger’s ‘notebooking’ practice, was recognized as more or less dialogic, and this was recognized by pupils, students, and teachers. Improved written feedback can, the research concluded, help in “making a greater contribution to creative learning and the communal nature of learning through dialogue”, and this “is not necessarily related to the quantity of feedback” as “[s]ome of the most ‘spirited’ comments were very short, and some longer comments were dismissed as exasperating” (Stern & Backhouse, 2011, p. 344). Written assessment feedback could, it was suggested, be more ‘spirited’, in the sense of contributing to the holistic–spiritual development of pupils.

A second UK example is based on my visits to Kingstone School, a secondary school for pupils aged 11 to 16 in the Northern English city of Barnsley. (The school no longer exists, having merged in 2012 with another school and reopened with a different name on a different campus.) Traditionally, towards the end of each school year, pupils would take tests in most or all subjects, reports would be written by teachers (based on performance through the year and the end-of-year tests), and meetings would be held with the parents or carers of each pupil to discuss performance and progress. The traditional processes are time-consuming, stressful for many of the pupils and teachers, and were not felt, in this school, to contribute a great deal to pupils’ learning. They changed to a viva system, which, at the time of my visits (in 2009), included all pupils in Year 7 (aged 11–12). Pupils were given six weeks to prepare a 1500-word essay about a subject of their own choosing, along with a presentation on what they had learned that year and an electronic portfolio demonstrating achievement in terms of their personal learning and thinking skills. (These skills were promoted, briefly, in English education, see QCA, 2008.) Each child led an hour-long discussion about their progress at school, and reflected on what they needed to do next to improve further. The discussants
included other children from the same class, the class teacher (who chaired the meeting), an adult significant to the child (such as a parent), and another professional adult not known to the child. Assessment depended on how pupils performed in the interview, with the emphasis on performing learning as individuals rather than performing to/for grades. Such a transformation from a conformist to a creative approach to assessment is evidence of how assessment can be more holistic, even within a conventional school with all the external pressures experienced by UK schools. It also recovers performance of learning from the corruption of performativity directed at those beyond the school.

Not all external accountability is corrupting, and it is reasonable that some assessment should help assure external bodies that worthwhile learning is taking place. As Reiss and White describe it, “[a]ssessment of students' attainments can serve a number of functions, but is used principally for reasons of accountability and in order to help students in their learning”, and “[i]n the first of these, citizens have to be assured that schools are doing a good job, and part of this depends on evidence that their students are progressing satisfactorily” (Reiss & White, 2013, p. 55). In Sweden, moral and ethical education is established in the national curriculum (Skolverket, 2011), and research has been completed on how this element of the curriculum can and should be assessed. Inevitably, there are challenges in not only teaching but assessing ethics (Stern, 2017), but the reason for including this project is that it highlights some opportunities, and some risks, in assessment that goes beyond the more easily assessable criteria, such as knowledge. Lilja reported how teachers experienced the teaching and assessing of ethics, and one teacher reported:

You can see it as normative, but I do not think it has to be normative. It is up to the teacher to open up and make the pupils aware of what is what. You do not have to use the word normative, you can use questioning. ‘Does it have to be like this?’ and have a discussion about it too.  

(Teacher quoted in Lilja, 2017, p. 77)

The same teacher later said, “I think ethics is about how to treat others, not only about right and wrong, but how you actually act in practice”, so “ethical competence”, which is being assessed, “is then about being able to relate to other people in a good way” (Lilja, 2017, p. 77). Another teacher, however, found the practice harder to assess: “In one way it is more important that they are good human beings, of course it is more important, but I cannot grade that” (Lilja, 2017, p. 80). The Swedish curriculum and its assessment attempts to move to a more holistic approach; attempting, that is, to assess a much wider range of pupil qualities, including their ‘ethical competence.’ Yet, there are challenges in such assessment, including, for example, the use of grades, and the idea that it is much more straightforward to assess written eloquence than it is to assess ethical practice.

In the research of the Assessment Reform Group (ARG), assessment that best supports pupil learning (whatever they are learning) will have the following characteristics:

• it is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
• it involves sharing learning goals with pupils;
• it aims to help pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for;
• it involves pupils in self-assessment;
• it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them;
• it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
• it involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data.  

(ARG, 1999, pp. 5–6.)

One element in this list that is not explored in this chapter is peer assessment. Having peers as well as teachers involved in assessment is clearly a more holistic and communal approach (see Topping, 2009, focusing on schools, and Buchanan & Stern, 2012, focusing on student teachers). So the ARG
list is tremendously helpful, and it has the research support indicating it is helpful precisely in raising pupil grades. It is an advantage that it is not tied to particular educational approaches, but is suggested as appropriate for all approaches. And yet, for holistic education, there is a narrower range of appropriate educational approaches. The examples given in this section from the USA, UK, and Sweden indicate that the personal intentions of teachers and pupils, and how they are perceived by the pupils, are central to the meaning of assessment in holistic education. Those willing to engage in dialogic assessment (whatever detailed assessment processes are used, with or without grades, whether summative, formative, ipsative, criterion-referenced or norm-referenced), if the engagement between teachers and pupils is genuinely dialogic, it will be more likely to be engaging and personally affecting.

Conclusion

Buber’s description of genuine dialogue is one that is characterized by surprise. Dialogue is surprising in a “real conversation”, a “real embrace”, a “real duel”, and a “real lesson.” A real lesson is “neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises” (Buber, 2002, p. 241). Teachers should be surprised by pupils, their insights and creative responses to their work, and, in assessing work, teachers should admit their surprise. Pupils, too, should find their teachers surprising, even in assessment feedback. Assessment systems can all too easily destroy surprise, making everything predictable (according to pre-set criteria) and only measuring that which is easily measurable. However, assessment can be made more holistic, and can, therefore, celebrate surprise and uncertainty. In a real dialogue, there are surprises and uncertainties, and some issues remain unresolved. Such surprise and uncertainty is characteristic, also, of research and scholarship, so school learning that is meaningful and assessed holistically will also be preparing pupils for higher levels of learning.

Holistic schooling is characterized by care (of/for individual people) and curiosity (of/for that which is studied) (see Stern, 2018). Holistic assessment can contribute to holistic schooling by being itself dialogic, open to surprise and uncertainty, and thereby being caring and promoting curiosity.

References


