

Principal Sabbatical Report

Overview of the Sabbatical

This sabbatical was undertaken in Term 3, 2011. The main focus of the sabbatical was to gain a better understanding of student voice in written reporting.

As originally planned the sabbatical included attendance at the International Congress of Principals in Toronto. However, during the period of the sabbatical I was also very fortunate to be able to attend the Singapore Principals Forum and the Principals Delegation to China. These trips were extremely valuable in developing my knowledge of the importance of New Zealand students studying Asia language and culture.

My original writing plan for this sabbatical needed some adjustment as participating in these outstanding cultural experiences required some additional reporting. I provided a detailed report to the Newmarket Board of Trustees of my Singapore Forum learning experiences, and a full account of the 2011 Delegation to China can be found at

<http://ci.ac.nz/programmes/school-programmes/principals-delegation-to-china/>.

Acknowledgement

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To investigate how assessment to inform learning, with a focus on student voice, strengthens school and home learning partnerships through reporting.

Reporting has two main purposes. Firstly, it provides clear, positive and constructive feedback about children's and young people's learning and progress, looking back on what has been achieved against standards and expectations. Secondly, it creates an agenda for discussions between learners and those teaching and supporting them about their next steps in learning.

Building the curriculum 5. A framework for assessment: Reporting (June 2010)
www.scotland.gov.uk.

Introduction

The purpose of writing this report was to present the findings of an investigation into whether the use of student voice, an aspect of the principles of assessment for learning (AfL), can be a useful addition to written reporting. I wanted to find out whether schools in New Zealand were creating an agenda for discussions between learners, and those who teach and support them, through written reporting.

In particular, the question that I investigated was:

- How do schools use the principles of assessment to inform learning and in particular student voice, in written reporting to parents?

In the following section, in order to clarify aspects of this question, I briefly provide background information about the principles of AfL, describe the current written reporting context, and finally outline what I mean by '*student voice*'. This section will be followed by findings of my investigation then an analysis of student voice in written reporting. The analysis of the findings draws on the resource the 'Snapshot of Written Reporting Practice' (Practitioners Reporting Group, 2011), a review of written reporting practice undertaken by a group of New Zealand principals at the end of 2010. Finally, implications will be described and conclusions will be drawn.

Background Information

The written report is one method of reporting that can create an informational pathway between the home and school. It has long been an argument of mine that it is through such informational pathways that strong learning focused partnerships can be developed (Kofoed, 2009). A further argument that I put forward is the utilisation of student voice in written reporting strengthening this informational pathway. However, it is important at the outset of this report to

highlight that the use of 'student voice' is a fairly new aspect of assessment, particularly in relation to written reporting. For this reason, this new development in reporting needs to be treated cautiously. As Mansell and James (2009) argued, it goes without saying that assessment should promote, rather than undermine, good education, and the any new developments in assessment need to be reviewed with careful consideration to the consequences both intended and unintended, for the quality of the learning which results.

- **Assessment for Learning**

The term *Assessment for Learning*, was first introduced by Black and William in their seminal work *Inside the Black Box* (1998)¹, and caused a paradigm shift in thinking about assessment internationally and in New Zealand. AfL is described by Black and Wiliam (1998), as activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. The importance of AfL principles was quickly recognised in New Zealand and gained rapid ground in both policy and practice. In New Zealand, these principles were widely disseminated to teachers through professional development initiatives, and informed policy documents from the early 2000s. Moreover, the revised 2007 New Zealand Curriculum has given AfL principles much weight, reinforcing its role as a highly effective aspect of teaching and learning.

There are five key principles that guide AfL that are relevant to this report. These have been identified by the Assessment Reform Group (1999) in the United Kingdom as including:

¹ Black PJ and Wiliam D (1998), *Inside the Black Box* (online version available at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbla9810.htm)

- The provision of effective feedback to students
- The active involvement of students in their own learning
- Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment
- Recognition of the critical influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of students
- The need for students to be able to self-assess and understand how to improve

Given these principles underpin and are elaborated on in the Effective Pedagogy section of the New Zealand Curriculum I will not describe these in detail in this report. Simply put, the principles reinforce that the key to AfL is students being active participants in their own learning.

However, while these principles stand alone, they are often interconnected and I would argue that they are better thought of in this way. For example, in a classroom if these principles were evident, students would know what they were expected to learn at the outset of the learning, assessment would be used to identify any gaps or misunderstandings, and teachers would work with students to identify what he or she needed to do to improve (Mansell & James, 2009). In this way students would have a better understand of what they need to do to improve, have the necessary tools to make improvements, have strong ownership of learning, and greater motivation to improve. With support students then set new goals and develop next learning steps. Such an assessment and learning cycle provides information to both the teacher and the student, influences what people do next, and supports the ownership of the assessment most likely to influence learning outcomes. The responsibility for the learning is shared, with conversations, feedback and reflection intertwined (Askew & Lodge, 2000).

An important aspect of AfL is the change of focus from the teacher reflecting on a student's learning (and reporting achievement and progress against this information), to the student actively doing so. In this way it is the student that is at

the center of the assessment practice. This is a critical step for students in ensuring motivation and confidence (Absolum et al, 2009), and in ensuring student's learning and assessment capabilities are developed and affirmed. As Tunstall and Gripps (1996) recognized, it is in this way that students can construct ways forward for their own learning.

What is not so clear is whether the culture of New Zealand classrooms reflects AfL changes. Black and Wiliam (2002) reported research undertaken in the United Kingdom that found that while the rhetoric of AfL is often strong in classrooms the principles are not deeply embedded with often minimal changes to teaching pedagogy. Such a shift in classroom culture requires teachers to consider and plan for ways that students have a greater control over the assessment process.

- **Written Reporting**

Written reporting is one of several useful methods of reporting, and is valued by parents (Kofoed, 2009). Written reporting provides parents with regular information about their child's strengths and development needs. It also provides parents with information that can be a basis for discussion with children, and provides parents and children with an opportunity to review learning progress.

In New Zealand, written reporting of students' progress and achievement was subjected to legislative change by the government in 2010. Legislation mandated that parents were to receive at least two written reports per year. An outcome of the mandated changes was the formulation of guidelines from the Ministry of Education that indicated that written reporting include goal setting, next learning steps and information about what teachers and families can do to support students learning. Guidelines were based on the utilisation of aspects of AfL in written reporting.

Given the guidelines from the Ministry encouraging schools to include some information in written reports based on the principles of AfL it was expected that in the analysis stage of this investigation student voice would be an emergent feature in written reporting.

- **Student Voice and Self-Assessment**

In this report, the term 'student voice'² is used to describe student ownership of information reported, student input into what is reported, and the student's own voice in the reporting process. This term is inclusive of principles of AfL including student ownership of learning, feedback, feed forward and reflection, self-assessment, goal setting, and the development of next learning steps.

This view of student voice is similar to that of Rosemary Hipkins (2010) who argued that applications of student voice rested on particular pedagogical traditions. Drawing on constructivist theories, she suggested that teachers cannot know exactly what or how students have learned unless students are consulted about the learning they have made from any particular learning experience(s). She indicated that it is vital that student voice is used for determining the 'next learning steps' and how teachers can support students to take these steps (p.86).

Students need to be consulted about the learning they have made and be active participants in this consultation. This is also at the heart of building collaborative relationships. The resource Ka Hikitia (2009) underscores the importance of collaborative relationships. In this resource, collaborative relations are described as including students as active participants in the learning partnership between

²An alternative description of the term student voice is described by Bragg (2007). Bragg (and others) use this term to describe the idea that young people should have a say on a range of local and national matters including activities that consult young people on a range of legal, political, economic and social matters.

the student and supporting adults. It would appear that an active participant is one who has a voice.

So what might student voice look like in a written form? An example of student voice was outlined in an assessment rubric sourced from the AfL Toolbox (UK) http://www.assessmentforlearning.com/view_pagecontent.php?resourceid=136;id=r136#r136 . This assessment rubric includes both teachers and students (see Figure 1).

Student's Rubric

Beginning Level

I'm getting used to it_____

The child can make a simple map or plan with some identifiable features in pictorial form. The features are not in their correct relative positions.

I made a map using pictures to show different places and objects. I needed some help from my teacher to put them in the right places on the map.

Developing Level

I'm getting better_____

The child independently produces a map with three or more identifiable features in correct relative positions. Features may be shown as pictures or symbols.

I worked on my own to draw my map. I used some pictures and some symbols to show the different places and features. I know that I drew some of them in the correct place.

Mastering Level

I'm really getting it!_____

The child independently produces a map with most features in the correct position relative to one another. They use symbols rather than pictures to identify features and may include a simple key.

I completed my map by myself. I used symbols to show where different places are and a key to show what the symbols mean. I drew most of them in the correct place.

Figure 1 Teacher and Student Assessment Rubric.

While this is an example of classroom assessment, aspects of this rubric could be utilised for written reporting. In this way, aspects of an authentic classroom assessment could be utilised for more than one purpose. The written report is then a more integral aspect of the assessment process, and are also inclusive of students having greater ownership and voice in what is reported.

It would appear that greater use of student voice in assessment has much to offer for the development of motivated and autonomous learners. The Assessment Reform Group (UK) (2010), indicated that if learners are put first, that is, if they are at the centre of learning, then they need to have a place in the assessment and in the development of the assessment itself, and take part in all aspects of the assessment. The reasons given for this viewpoint, are that such involvement motivates students to learn, to take risks, to question, and accept the authority of the teacher, but have a stronger role in the relationship, with the learner more autonomous. This viewpoint of the Assessment Reform Group (UK) was supported by a significant numbers of studies that indicate increased engagement with learning, improved goal setting, and overall confidence (Sebba, 2009) led to greater student autonomy.

Findings

The section will review evidence in New Zealand of the use of student voice in written reports. The data was collected as part of the development of a 'Snapshot of Written Reporting Practice' compiled by the Practitioners Reporting Group in 2010. The Snapshot was used as a primary source of data for this investigation as it was the most recent review undertaken in New Zealand that included aspects of AfL in written reports³.

³ The latest iteration of this resource is available from <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/News/Practitioners-Reporting-Group>. The methodology used to gather the original data is described in this resource.

A secondary resource that provided data for the findings included *Written Reporting: Strengthening Learning Partnerships through Purposeful Reporting* (Kofoed, 2009).

Information from the Snapshot indicated that 61% of schools are reporting on student goals and next learning steps. This finding was not unexpected given the Ministry of Education Guidelines encouraging schools to do so. As this was the first snapshot of written reporting it is not known whether this percentage was due to the new legislation on written reporting, or part of schools development of AfL pedagogy in written reporting. However, this information was similar to the findings of the a previous study of written reporting by the author who found that five out of nine schools in her research study included information in written reports that were based on AfL principles (Kofoed, 2009). Of note, this previous study was undertaken before the changes to the legislation.

Information from the Snapshot indicated that 10% of the written reports included student voice. This finding was similar to that of Kofoed (2009) who found that one out of nine schools in her research study included student voice. Moreover, the following examples of student voice provided in the Snapshot were useful to show what student voice looks like in written reporting.

This year I am really proud to get out of rainbow reading and how my reading age is 10-11.

Reading: My goal was to concentrate on reading only one book at a time. I am still working on achieving this.

PE: My goal was to do better in the school athletics. I increased my running throughout the term and I got I to the final. My next step is to work on my long jump. My running improvement might help.

So far this year I have mostly enjoyed physical education and maths. I love maths because the equations and the sums Mr Smith gives me make

me think deeply about the answers. During the last term I have learnt how to develop my inference skills when I am reading a text by taking the time to read something again if it does not make sense and if the answer isn't clear to read between the lines. I know this because I have achieved more work by double checking my answers and by trying my hardest in reading. An area I still need to work on is Writing. I love writing but I need to concentrate on my descriptions. I am able to use similes and metaphors. I have really enjoyed my first year at Intermediate and can't wait until next term.

What I am proud of most this year. *I am proud of my art because I used lots of lovely bright colours and I like the feeling of the paint brush sliding on the paper so that encourages me to really do my best. I also liked Hikitai because you could get to try new things and have loads of fun! I am real proud of my writing and now I am a whopping great LEVEL 3B! I like my writing. Lynley Dodd inspired me and Roald Dahl helped.*

What I would like to get better at next year. *I would like to improve my maths. When I took the test I was on early stage 5 and I haven't changed since that test. I want to be at stage 6 by the end of next year. I also want to improve on my multiplication. Especially my 7 x tables, I find them hard because you have to plus 7 every-time.*

The high level of understanding students have of their own progress and achievement and of their next learning steps is very apparent in these excerpts from written reports. The enthusiasm, motivation and engagement of these students in their learning is also evident in this use of student voice.

Implications

Given that we have a growing understanding of the importance of student voice in the classroom a corresponding increase in how to utilise this in reporting is not surprising. There are some signs that teachers have made the transference of

the use of student voice from the classroom into reporting, albeit at an emergent stage. I would argue that this is a logical next step and that this is supportive of AfL principles. While historically student voice in learning and in assessment in the classroom has been a whisper, if not silent (Smith and Smith, 2007), findings from this investigation would indicate that this volume is now on the increase.

Given that the findings indicate student voice is still a very minor aspect of written reporting some could argue that student voice does not have a place in written reporting to parents. There are likely to be some educators who see the role of the written report as summative (an end point assessment) and who do not see the value or need for a written report to provide formative information. However, Paul Newton (2010) argued that we need to think about assessment as not being either summative or formative, but 'fit for purpose'. That is, it is not the written report itself that is of importance but 'how' it is used.

It may also be the case that some teachers do not see the connection between assessment and next learning steps. Classroom teachers play a large role in the use of AfL and a high level of commitment is necessary for students to have ownership of the assessment process.

The revised New Zealand Curriculum (2007) describes a vision of students who are confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners. This document characterises effective assessment as involving students discussing, clarifying, reflecting on goals and strategies and progress with teachers, parents and others. In this way they are developing their capacity to self-assess and further develop as autonomous learners. It would appear that there is much the written report can offer to support this vision.

In Conclusion

Student voice in reporting is all about putting the student at the centre of the learning and assessment process. We need to think about the student and their learning needs as part of the written reporting process. It should not be too difficult to look at our written reporting practices, and see if they align with this goal.

In regard to written reporting, AfL opens up opportunities for students to reflect on their progress and to account for their achievement and progress against the goals they have set. In this way the written report becomes a vehicle for support of the achievement, progress, goals and next learning steps from other interested adults. The opportunity for 'student voice' in the written reporting process might provide opportunities to further increase student motivation and confidence. It could also indicate that some teachers in schools are constructing assessment programmes that maximise and realise student potential.

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