

Principal Sabbatical Report: Rex Wilson, Allandale School, Whakatane

FOCUS: Can the National Standards be used as a basis to develop students as experts in their own learning in literacy and numeracy? Can a process be developed so that assessment *is* learning?

Overview

Much of the power of the National Standards comes as students' own the language of the National Standards and are able to self-assess; and know what it is they can do to improve. Can we develop "kid friendly" language so that our kids can make personal meaning of the standards. The intention is for kids to know the criteria so they can become their own learning coaches.

Developing self-confident learners with growing skills in reading, writing, and maths is what this inquiry is about.

Sabbatical taken Term 2 2011.

A huge thank you to my Board of Trustees for their support of my sabbatical. Thanks too to my staff, particularly Deputy Principal Rene Otto for keeping things going so well in my absence, I'm sure we're all wiser for the experience. New Zealand principals are privileged to have this sabbatical opportunity, I acknowledge the vision of the Ministry of Education with support from NZEI and STA with this initiative.

Executive Summary

Can the National Standards be used as a basis to develop students as experts in their own learning in literacy and numeracy? As long as some other conditions in the classroom are suitable then the answer is yes. The National Standards articulate a set of expectations that once understood by students, can provide an opportunity to learn how to learn. It is the learning that is an essential part of the assessment of the National Standards that makes this approach so exciting. This is assessment *as* learning. Below is the process:

- a secure understanding of the National Standards by the teacher
- a documented interpretation of what these expectations might look like in an authentic setting (either in the classroom or at home)
- a discussion with the kids so that they understand the above, this may require a change of vocabulary but the essence of the expectation must remain intact
- a positive learning culture in the classroom
- the opportunity for the kids to record their evidence of meeting the expected standard
- an audience for the above

This investigation is 'work in progress' which I'm looking forward to completing in the normal course of busy school life.

Purpose

This report is written for anyone interested in using the National Standards as a basis for kid friendly assessment. It is not intended as an academic paper, rather an easy read for teachers who would like to pursue assessment as learning with kids. I have read extensively on this topic and encouragingly there is a lot of academic support for this approach as I interpret the readings.

I have made no comment on the political aspects of the implementation of the National Standards. I believe that this topic would be worthy of a sabbatical investigation, it isn't however the purpose of this one. We have the National Standards in place and this report suggests a method of using them as an aid to effective learning.

Background

The Education (National Standards) Amendment Act 2008 passed through parliament in December of 2008. The associated expectations on schools were that schools would work with the standards in 2010 and use them to set achievement targets in 2011. The thinking behind this sabbatical was that the National Standards provide an expectation of learning, if we can get kids to understand what those expectations mean for them, perhaps they can, with teacher support, use the National Standards to help focus their learning. One of the cornerstones of effective formative assessment is that the student understands what it is that they are expected to learn. Perhaps the National Standards provide that expectation.

I have used the word 'kids' extensively in this report. Translate that to 'students' if that is more comfortable. The term 'kid friendly assessment' comes from the Network of Performance Based Schools (more about this later) I think it communicates the idea that this is about our kids.

Methodology

The Network of Performance Based Schools is funded by the British Columbia Ministry of Education and is designed to improve quality and equity through inquiry, teamwork across roles, schools and districts, and a concentrated focus on applying coaching forms of assessment to assist learners to take greater ownership of their learning. Participation in the Network is on an annual basis and is voluntary. There has been a steady growth in Network membership since its inception in 2000.

After visiting the network's webpage early in 2010 I became interested in the work that they are doing particularly around assisting learners to take greater ownership of their learning. I contacted the co-leaders of the Network of Performance Based Schools in British Columbia, Canada and have since become an associate member of the network. In May 2011 I attended the network's seminar that covered the following topics:

- Educating The Heart As Well As The Mind *Kimberly Schonert-Reichl and Shelley Hymel*
- Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education (pp

3-22)

- If the Teacher Is Clear about It, the Students Will Get It *Timperley, Parr, and Bertanee*s
- Unleashing the Promise of Assessment for Learning *Lorna Earl, Louis Volante, and Stephen Katz*
- Leading Learning for School Effectiveness *Alma Harris and Michelle Jones*
- Walking together for a better future *Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert*

Since the seminar I have read the following texts which have influenced my thinking on this topic:

Flyers

Building and Connecting Learning Communities The Power of Networks for School Improvement Steven Katz, Lorna M. Earl, Sonia Ben Jaafar

Leading Schools in a Data-Rich World Harnessing Data for School Improvement Lorna M. Earl, Steven Katz Foreword by Michael Fullan

Assessment As Learning Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning Lorna M. Earl

Books

- Inside the Black Box – Black and William
- Leadership Mindsets – Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert
- Assessment as Learning – Lorna M Earle

Articles

“Directions for Assessment in New Zealand” Developing students’ assessment capabilities by Michael Absolum, Evaluation Associates Ltd, Auckland, Lester Flockton, University of Otago John Hattie, University of Auckland Rosemary Hipkins, New Zealand Council for Educational Research Ian Reid, Learning Media Ltd

Pulling it all together

At this point in the process I was convinced that to be successful, whatever I came up with for the National Standards had to be consistent with best formative assessment practice. The paper “Directions for Assessment in New Zealand” Developing students’ assessment capabilities by Michael Absolum, Evaluation Associates Ltd, Auckland, Lester Flockton, University of Otago John Hattie, University of Auckland Rosemary Hipkins, New Zealand Council for Educational Research Ian Reid, Learning Media Ltd has provided useful directions for me in this regard.

As Absolum et al state “In our view, ‘getting it right’ begins with ensuring that students are placed at the heart of the assessment process and educated in ways that develop their capability to assess their own learning. This means that their assessment capabilities need developing too, not just those of their teachers and school leaders. When we say ‘assessment capable’, we mean ‘able and motivated to access, interpret and use information from quality assessments in ways that affirm or further learning’.

This was very relevant to me as I searched for ‘kid friendly’ assessment tools to support the National Standards, these tools need to develop kids abilities to assess their own learning. As Lorna Earle in her book “Assessment as Learning” states, “The student is the link. Assessment as Learning is the ultimate goal, where students are their own best assessors”

So I started thinking how I could get kids to understand the language of the National Standards and then assess themselves in relation to those standards. This became a whole set of learning in itself, as Absolum et al explain “We see the development of students’ assessment capabilities as a way of integrating the values and key competencies with active learning of curriculum ‘content’.” The notion of kids assessing themselves as they learn ticked a whole lot of the Key Competency boxes:

Thinking	✓	The kids really have to think about their learning to be able to do this
Relating to others	✓	Establishing learning focused relationships with their teacher and peers is key to this
Managing self	✓	This is the whole concept of self regulated learning. Assessment as learning requires high levels of self management.
Understanding language, symbols and texts	✓	The kids learn to assess the evidence before them in relation to the National Standards
Participating and contributing	✓	This is about being part of a learning community, sharing your learning with peers, the teacher and families. It’s about sharing the responsibility of learning. Our obligation to help each other learn.

Absolum et al continue “Our primary concern is to develop students’ assessment capabilities so that they know how to obtain evidence of learning, how to interpret assessment information, and when to ask for clarification.”

“When students participate in the assessment of their own learning, they learn to recognise and understand main ideas and to apply new learning in different ways and situations. While at school, students have teachers on hand who can help them get better at making such judgments. If we want them to be able to assess their own learning later on, beyond school, we need to help them develop their assessment capabilities now.”

So this provided some real direction for my thinking. How can we get kids to obtain evidence of their learning in a way that promotes feedback from teachers, families and peers all the while contributing to their learning, not sitting beside or after their learning but as an authentic and integral part of their learning?

The kids

In the latter part of my sabbatical I took that question to the kids. I went armed with a

matrix of desirable behaviours of a successful Year 5 reader that I had created based on the National Standards and the Literacy Learning Progressions. The standard itself is -

“By the end of year 5, students will read, respond to, and think critically about texts in order to meet the reading demands of the New Zealand Curriculum as they work towards level 3. Students will locate, evaluate, and integrate information and ideas within and across a small range of texts appropriate to this level as they generate and answer questions to meet specific learning purposes across the curriculum.”

The characteristic	The Evidence
I know what I like to read	I can talk to you about the books I like
I know what I'm able to read	I can easily find a book in the library that I can read to you
I know where to find the texts that I like and can read	I can get an appropriate book that I like and can read it to you
I use a range of strategies to monitor my reading when it gets tricky	My running records will show how I do this e.g. Re-reading, varying my speed, attending to the most important information, using visual cues, using my knowledge of sentence structures
I can read a range of texts, both fiction and non-fiction at around the 9.5-10.5 years	My reading log shows the range of books I've read this year.
I can make appropriate inferences from a range of texts	During group teaching time I can explain things like “The family is not enjoying the trip so Dad feels pressured to find a place to sleep”
I ask questions of my self as I read	During group teaching time I can ask things like “Why did Mum think that the camping spot was too dark?”
I can work out the meanings of ‘figures of speech’	During group teaching time I can explain things like “broke the silence”

The characteristic	The Evidence
I can read for sustained periods of time	My teacher/someone at home sees me reading regularly for sustained periods
I can read a long text, like a novel, over a period of days	My teacher /someone at home sees me reading a book that takes several days to read
Reading makes me think of things while I read	During group teaching time I can talk about the things the story made me think about
I can automatically read all the high frequency words	My running records will show how I do this
I can usually work out the meaning of new words	During group teaching time I can talk about new words and what I think they mean
I can recognize figurative language like similes, metaphors and personification	During group teaching time I can talk about the similes, metaphors and personification
I can make connections between what I already know and what I'm reading which helps me understand the meaning of what I'm reading	During group teaching time I can explain how things I already know relate to things I've read. This helps me to understand and explain what I've read.
When reading non fiction texts I can skim, scan, find key words, read topic sentences, and use subheadings to help me find information that I'm looking for and then explain this to someone else.	Given questions that either the teacher, other students or I have asked, I can use my reading skills to find the answer and explain it to someone else.
Using several non fiction texts on the same topic I can infer information not stated directly in the text.	I can talk to you about inferences I've made in my reading and explain my thinking behind what I've inferred
I can explain a writer's purpose	

I asked the kids, how they could show their teacher, classmates and family that they can do these things. With typical childish simplicity the kids told me that they'd just show them and tell them. But how could 30 students all tell their teacher about their reading I asked, this would be unmanageable? The kids responded, "We'll record it so that the teacher, our families and our classmates can see it." So the kids taught me how to record using the apple software *photobooth*.

That was the "ah ha" moment for me. Yes, this is possible, with support, kids can understand these expectations, at least this group of Year 5's could, and yes they are able to manage most of the process themselves. Over the last few weeks the kids and I have been discussing how they could put together the evidence described above and then record it using either photobooth or imovie. At the time of writing this remains work in progress but indications are that this will work well. Certainly the teachers who have seen this recorded evidence have been impressed with the simplicity of the evidence it provides.

The components

The essential elements of this are as follows:

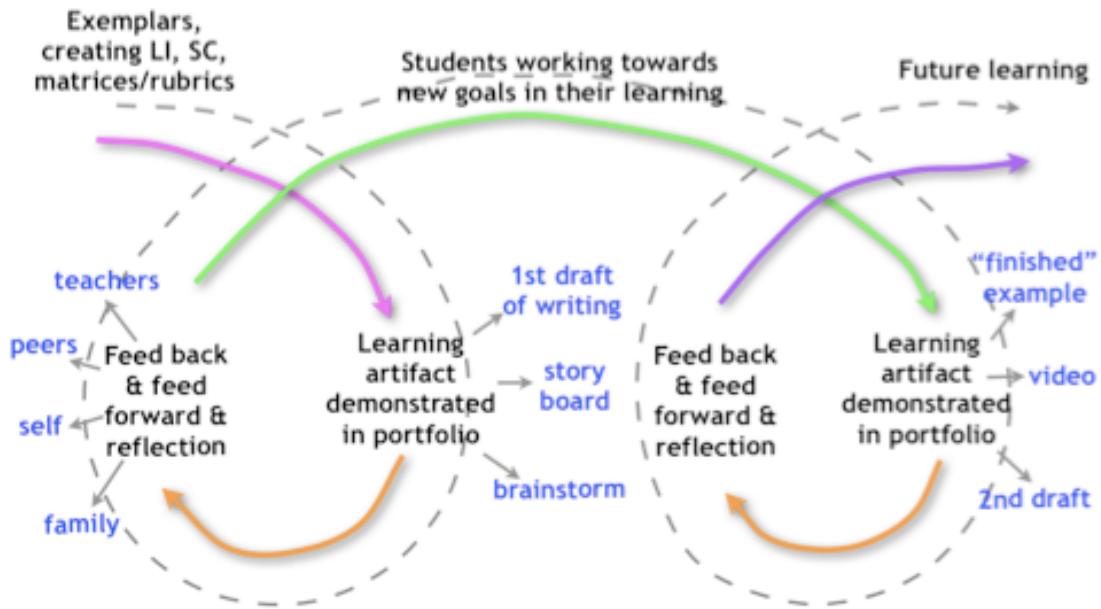
- a secure understanding of the National Standards by the teacher
- a documented interpretation of what these expectations might look like in an authentic setting (either in the classroom or at home)
- a discussion with the kids so that they understand the above, this may require a change of vocabulary but the essence of the expectation must remain intact
- a positive learning culture in the classroom
- the opportunity for the kids to record their evidence of meeting the expected standard
- an audience for the above

We have chosen to record the evidence using electronic media. The students I've been working with are members of our e-learning class and this is relatively simple for them. I'm sure that there are other media that would work well.

Absolum et al discuss assessment as being educative. I believe that the National Standards provide us with the opportunity to have educative assessment, with kids at the heart. The opportunity exists for our kids to develop key competencies through assessment as learning. Technology provides us with an opportunity for kids, either individually or in groups to record their evidence of satisfactorily meeting the National Standards as long as the success criteria are well understood by the kids.

The following diagram comes from work by Nik Rate around e-portfolios. The learning artifacts that Nik refers to in this model could well be based on the National Standards as described above and then fit comfortably in to evidence gathering cycle.

Assessment for Learning & ePortfolio Cycle



Getting it right for Maori

As the majority of the students at my school identify as Maori I need to be sure that assessment as learning will be beneficial, Mahuika and Bishop (Appendix 2, paper 6) argue that Maori students will only be offered the educational opportunities that they are currently denied when there is a radical shift in the cultural dimensions of engagement:

In contrast to those contexts for learning and assessment that are currently dominant, mainstream classrooms [need to be] places where power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence; where culture counts; where learning and assessment is interactive, dialogic, and spirals; where participants are connected and committed to one another and where there is a common vision of excellence.

Assessment as learning provides this opportunity, as the kids themselves are at the centre of it. The “non-dominating relations of interdependence” exist because the teacher’s role is one of supporting the kids to understand the expectations of the National Standards, then providing lots of opportunities for kids to provide evidence that they meet those standards. It is not a test, it is open ended in its approach in that the students are free to express themselves in a manner that suits them, so long as it provides the evidence. Maori kids can tell their own stories, they are valid in this context. In the assessment as learning model assessment is interactive, dialogic, and it spirals from one level to the next.

A couple of further considerations

It has been my experience that kids' talking to kids about their learning has a certain authenticity that is somehow lacking when adults are involved. Kids somehow communicate with other kids a bit better than adults do in many situations. This process capitalizes on this as the kids record themselves and these videos become exemplars for other kids. Kids speaking naturally about their learning to other kids. Another observation on which I have absolutely no research evidence to back up, is that some kids don't necessarily need to be taught a lot of this sort of stuff, but they can learn it. This is about putting ideas in front of kids and allowing them to learn from it themselves without adult intervention. This capitalizes on the powerful effects of modeling. While kids do need to be taught many skills it is not necessarily a requisite to learning. Sometimes just showing kids what they need to do is enough, occasionally children will have the necessary skills, attitudes and motivation to do the rest for themselves. It is worth giving them the opportunity to learn things for themselves.

To be successful in the classroom these ideas rely heavily on a positive learning culture. It is my belief that some students would be able to see a video of their successful peers demonstrating their evidence of meeting the National Standards and this would be sufficient for them to understand the expectations and over time, achieve them too. These are students who can think, relate to others, understand language symbols and texts, manage themselves and participate and contribute. Other students will need support with these competencies and that is the real opportunity that this process provides. By using the National Standards as goals to achieve there is an authentic opportunity for teachers to teach and students to learn the Key Competencies so assessment *is* learning with the learning outcomes being that kids learn the necessary skills required under the National Standards, by developing their Key Competencies kids can learn to demonstrate these skills.

I have begun doing the things outlined in this report with a group of Year 5 students. I have been encouraged by exemplars that we have been able to put together. At the time of writing this report I have not completed recording these exemplars and certainly haven't used these ideas in a classroom setting. However, the work I've achieved to this point suggests to me that I can confidently answer the original question with a "yes". The National Standards do provide the learning goals, which with appropriate support kids can understand. Having understood the expectation kids can then be supported to achieve them. For some kids this might mean simply leaving them to sort this out for themselves, for others they will need significant support to learn the required skills and then be able to demonstrate that they have learnt them or alternatively where on the journey their learning sits. Either way, significant and valuable learning is the outcome.

This investigation is 'work in progress' which I'm looking forward to completing in the normal course of busy school life.