

Formative Assessment Practice

Formative Leadership Practice

Formative Teaching Practice

Assessment of Learning

Assessment for Learning

Assessment as Learning

What is it that really closes the
Achievement Gap?

Term Two 2008 Sabbatical Report

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Introduction

Congratulations to all of those in New Zealand who have been responsible for the development of formative assessment, leadership and teaching practice within New Zealand. We are right at the leading edge of these exciting developments and we will only stay this way with a concerted effort from all educators to keep the perils of national testing out of New Zealand schools. During my research I was continually being informed about the restrictions that were placed on teachers and students in countries where controls on students learning were in place through national testing and reporting, Summative Assessment - Assessment of Learning.

To undertake my research I visited schools in Hawke's Bay and the Central North Island, and had discussions with a range of other principals. But, the most important part was attending an Assessment for Learning symposium on Vancouver Island, British Columbia organised by Dr Anne Davies and her "connect 2learning company."

Assessment for Learning Symposium Vancouver

Before I start outlining my findings it is important to acknowledge all of the following people for their assistance:

Dr Anne Davies

Dr Paul Le Mahieu

Dr Beth Parrott-Reynolds

Dr Sharon Frieson

Dr Richard Stiggins

Sandra Herbst

Kathy Busick

They all voluntarily offered their time and expertise to enhance five days of full on action that proved to be an extremely valuable learning experience. I also wish to acknowledge the team from Maine, Susan Gendron (Commissioner), her assistant Angela Faherty and Wanda Monthey (Policy Director of Standards and Assessment). This was the team that I worked alongside. It was like honing ones thoughts, ideas and skills with New Zealand's top three educators and then assisting them as they developed their plans for Maine. The other thirty course participants who came from Alberta, Alaska, Hawaii, Manitoba, Atlanta, Saskatchewan, Georgia, Calgary, Slave Creek, California and Chicago also made a tremendous contribution, as we set about on our journey of leading the way to making classroom assessment work.

I left Canada thinking that it would be very easy in New Zealand to use the excellent symposium model. That would be, to gather together a team of experts, cover their costs and have them offer groups of educators from various schools and clusters throughout New Zealand, the opportunity to enhance and develop their plans for the benefit of the learners in their communities.

As you read through and absorb this report there are a number of questions about how effective engaging learners in assessment for learning is for you to ask yourself

and your learning community. It is important that you understand the difference between Assessment of Learning and Assessment for Learning to begin with.

Definitions

Assessment of Learning is information collected by teachers about the students learning for the purpose of sharing that information with Parents, Employers, for School reporting and for Governmental requests.

Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by students and their teachers to decide where their learning is, what they need to do to improve and how best they can do that. The philosophy behind Assessment for Learning is that the most important focus is what the student thinks about and does with assessment results.

The real difference that needs to be fully understood by the wider community is that Assessment for Learning:

- Engages students;
- Focuses on “what” and “how” students learn;
- Involves students, parents and teachers working collaboratively;
- Is an ongoing systematic process;
- Is part of effective teaching and learning;
- Supports and reflects curricular outcomes;
- Recognises all educational achievement;
- Respects the dignity and the development needs of learning;
- Is equitable and fair;
- Is a key professional skill

Success for All

A major focus on Assessment for Learning should be the goal of all educators. To enable this to happen we must ensure that the following key indicators are all in place:

- All learners need quality feedback;
- Teachers are key learners;
- All learners must enjoy what they are doing;
- Teachers must show that they are enjoying what they are learning through modelling and the using of exemplars;
- The fun factor is an important part of learning;
- Never under estimate the importance and benefits to be gained through the recognition and celebration of success;
- Success has many different looks and it looks different to different people;
- The teacher as the key learner must find opportunities to share their passions and successes with their students;
- Self and peer assessment is in place and is ingrained as routine.

Key Questions to ask Students

- What are you good at?
- What do you need to improve?
- What do you want me to notice?
- What did you learn from _____?

The teacher must regularly discuss with students what they are doing and what they need to do next. Students need to be able to verbalise their learning. Teachers must build on the foundations that are already there. Like any building project solid foundations are crucial. Before any new learning can take place skills and processes need to be in place, the scaffolding is happening and then the new knowledge will become ingrained.

It is important to model, show and discuss what is expected and ensure that every student can answer:

- Where they are at;
- Where they need to go;
- How they are going to get there

These need to be crafted by the lead learner, the teacher, and it shouldn't be assumed that students know. Teachers shouldn't underestimate the use of quality samples, models and learning examples as vehicles to show students what they need to know and what is expected of them.

The emotional reactions to results and achievement will determine what student's do about their learning. This is where Assessment of Learning or testing creates the big turn off:

- 10/10, that was easy, I don't have to learn any more;
- 3/10, I give up, I'm no good at this stuff;
- Grade A, B or C, I have no idea what to do next;
- Grade D or E; is it worth the risk that I might fail again in public?

We must assess accurately and use results effectively. Most one off teacher and school created tests produce invalid data. National testing doesn't enhance the quality of learning for students as it is mainly used for school-wide data collection and compliance based demands. However, norm referenced tests do have a place so that comparisons can be made.

For assessment to be effective and useful it needs to be sound and balanced, and it must provide the student with quality feedback and dependable information.

Tests must have classroom benefits and key testing decisions at all levels must have the learner uppermost. We must abandon the belief that intimidation motivates. Only teachers can balance the assessment of or for learning in their classroom. It is the classroom teacher that helps the struggler close the gap, not the test. A series of learning progressions need to be developed with the rationale behind it of success for all. Students need to know what success looks like and learning progressions do that.

Lessons Learned from Involving the Learners

Students need to solve real problems, real issues, ask real questions about things that matter to know they can make a difference.

- When students ask for expert feedback they want to get expert feedback;
- Students want to be involved in their own process of learning;
- Don't underestimate the power and importance of student voice;
- Listen to students and evaluate and share their responses with your teachers.

Ask students questions like:

- When was learning easy and what made it easy?
- When did you really learn a whole lot?
- What makes a good teacher and what do you see in a good teacher?
- What do a mark and a stamp tell you?
- Do you understand what needs to be in your work to get a good mark?
- Do you ever get a second chance to improve yourself?
- How do you know you are on the right track with your learning and progress?
- What do you really like learning about when you are not at school?
- How do you know you are learning?
- How do you know you have really learned something?
- If you could change something about your learning what would you change?

Closing the Achievement Gap

We need to turn the students into assessors of their learning and abandon the belief that only adults assess students. Self and peer assessment are just as important as when students assess themselves; they then have ownership and they then control the manner in which that data is used and that has profound gains in achievement for everyone and especially for struggling students.

Judgemental feedback is not sufficient as it is not productive in providing feedback that enables further learning and builds the confidence of the learner. Confidence is a self-motivator so students learning targets need to be within reach in order to build and maintain confidence. Teachers and students need ongoing opportunities to learn to assess productively and to provide effective feedback. The literacy of formative assessment must be taught and used regularly so that purposeful non-judgemental feedback is given to all learners. Students need to articulate what they are doing, where they are heading and use high quality student matrixes to identify their next steps for them.

There is no evidence that Assessment of Learning which has been placed to the forefront by some educational institutions and supported by some political parties has been successful in closing the achievement gap in New Zealand. Many teachers and educational leaders across the world would argue that it has only sustained the gap and that National Testing has done far more harm than good.

On the other hand, Assessment for Learning has proven successful in many schools in narrowing the achievement gap for students.

In the long term to be successful in closing the achievement gap we need to:

- Move beyond tests towards the collecting of continuous information on each student's progress;
- Continue to refine progressions of learning;
- Assure the quality of all assessment information;
- Turn learners into assessors;
- Rethink feedback strategies and balance descriptive with judgemental feedback;
- Build the confidence of all learners. They must believe that they can do it;
- Provide all teachers with on going opportunities to learn from each other;
- Focus on the learners work not the learner;
- Teach children the assessment language they need to advocate for themselves;
- Recognise that writing personal success stories are hard evidence of learning.

Achieving the above will ensure that students will prosper, especially those who struggle to learn, and that should be your dream and mine.

To achieve the above we need to stimulate the teacher and emphasise that they are the key learner by providing them with a range of professional development opportunities.

Key Questions for leaders to ask teachers

- What are you good at?
- What do you need to improve?
- What do you want me to notice?
- What is your passion?
- What did you learn from _____?
- What do you want me to see?

Adult learners need to be engaged in their own powerful professional learning in a variety of ways both alone and with others. They also need to know that success can be seen in many different ways.

Powerful Professional Learning

- Is purpose driven and related to an overall vision;
- Engages learners so they learn by doing;
- Is learning alongside colleagues in response to personally identified needs, concerns or issues;
- Invites us all to learn from others whose knowledge, expertise and wisdom we respect;

- Results in sustained commitment to improving teaching habits, since change occurs at the individual level;
- Is continually informed by information about students learning from students;
- Is supported by community reflection and focussed conversation

As a school leader you need to know:

- What are the main indicators that powerful professional learning is taking place in your learning community?
- What are the lagging indicators?
- How are the adults using success criteria?
- How are the adults engaged in self-assessment?
- How are the adults showing evidence of growth and implementation?
- Is evidence of growth also evidence of implementation?
- Are there stories of implementation?
- Are the school professional development leaders using feedback to inform adults of their next steps and further opportunities?
- Does the learning represent a destination that will serve children first?

In developing and implementing a successful Assessment for Learning plan in your learning community you need to ask and answer the following questions:

- What actions need to be taken?
- Who is going to take the actions?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- When should it happen?
- What needs to be looked at to see if it is working?
- Do the actions lead one to the proposed destination?
- What will success look like in our system?
- Is the school investing in things that actually make a difference?
- Is the professional development being offered suitable?
- Is the school involving the learners in the process?
- Have we got a range of professional learning communities in place and are they continually engaged in professional learning conversations?
- In your school is it okay to take a risk, make a mistake or ask for help?
- Have we got a culture in place amongst the adults and the students where everything we do enhances the value of formative practice as an approach, not only in assessing learning but to live by...
- As the professional leader in the school am I prepared to and how do I “Walk the Talk”?

Informing the Community

My discussions and observations during my sabbatical indicates that this is the area not being done so well, even by those schools who are strong in Assessment for Learning/Formative Practice.

We are not promoting how it benefits every child in their learning and the impact it is having on their lives. We need to write and publish success stories. Success stories can be written by individuals (adults and students), groups, clusters or they could be

curriculum-based initiatives. A success story has far more impact and carries a great deal more influence and interest than a grade or a mark.

We need to track student's progress and report individual and group achievements to students, parents, Boards of Trustees and the forgotten group, the wider community on a regular basis. They are all stakeholders.

Some suggestions for Informing and Involving the Community

- Three way conferences (pupil – parent – teacher);
- Learning Journeys – Portfolios;
- Teacher Learning Improvement Plans;
- Websites;
- School publications;
- Media, School and Local Radio;
- Produce C.D's, D.V.D's for parents and the community;
- E mail trees;
- Children reporting to the wider community;
- Use local community opportunities to celebrate success;
- Write and share success stories;
- Use regular self-review to report the areas that require improvement and the successes

It is extremely important that every educator in New Zealand who believes in the Formative Assessment Practice educates parents and the wider community of its benefits. As the New Zealand Curriculum says:

“Effective assessment involves students. They discuss, clarify, and reflect on their goals, strategies, and progress with their teachers, their parents, and one another. This develops students capacity for self and peer assessment, which lead in turn to increased self-direction.”

And the very wise words from Anne Davies

“Quality classroom assessment has the largest positive impact on student learning and achievement ever documented.”

In summary, it is Assessment FOR Learning, Assessment AS Learning that works not Assessment OF Learning.

Conclusion

Sincere thanks to all of those people who enabled me to continue my formative assessment learning and made the sabbatical possible. It was an empowering and enriching experience where I was able to reflect on and enhance my knowledge in a non-threatening yet challenging way.

Lastly, for relaxation, spending time with family in the United Kingdom, visiting Spain and travelling through Turkey were all wonderful things to do before I was stimulated by the high powered educational dialogue at the Kingfisher Spa and Resort on Vancouver Island.

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