Speaking Plainly: Student Led Reporting in Relation to the New Zealand Curriculum Standards

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ABSTRACT

With the development of the New Zealand Curriculum Standards how can teachers encourage the engagement of their students and community in the learning and reporting process? Student agency can be seen both as a prerequisite for and as an outcome of meaningful, engaged and self-directed learning. Agentic learners research their own learning and are active participants in a tripartite relationship with their teacher and parents/ whanau. Arguably the most important achievement of school should be for learners to set learning tasks interdependently, analyse the foundations of one's actions and of the actions of others (including the teacher), learn from one's mistakes, sense the boundary between the known and the unknown (Kudriavtsev & Urazalieva, 2006), ultimately driving their own learning in whatever the context may be.

POSITIONING STUDENTS

If we are to address the spirit of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and enable learners to meet the challenges outlined in the Knowledge Age literature, we advocate that practitioners 'look to the learning' to ensure that any assessments drop out the bottom of rich and robust curricula in which students and their parents/whanau are afforded agency to negotiate. We advocate that parents/whanau and children should be positioned agentically in the assessment process, in partnership with the teacher. For students to develop this expertise they need opportunities to develop the disposition to research their own learning.

As accountability is decentralised and is increasingly devolved outward through New Right policy development, there is a need to ensure that the students and their parents are afforded a voice in the reporting process. This article sets out to explore some of the factors that the writers consider are pertinent as schools interpret New Zealand Curriculum Standards (NZCS). The second section of the article describes how one school has promoted an inclusive reporting process through engaging students with their achievement data as a primary source of information. By engaging with their own evidence students can develop a real understanding of their learning processes and in this way grow their competencies.

If students are to see learning as a process and more than just isolated events that have no purpose or relevance to them, they need learning opportunities which position them as agentic. An agentic learner is one who is capable and competent. They are authoritative and accountable (Greeno, 2006). Students who have agency initiate ideas and challenge or question what others say. Responsibility, interdependence and expectations of participation are important elements of classroom practice focused on active student involvement.

Agentic students draw from what they already know and what others know to actively construct their own knowledge. According to Deakin Crick (2008) achievements in vocational settings, relationships or in society are not based simply on the accumulation of second-hand knowledge stored as data. Achievements are based on the combination of this stored knowledge with skills, values, attitudes, desires and motivation and their application in human settings. Agentic students who display this disposition to create knowledge are more likely to be lifelong learners, a key tenet in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM AND STANDARDS

Through the opportunity to develop their own interpretations of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), schools have licence to be creative in their approach to learning. When the draft was first released the Ministry highlighted that it is different from the old one as it encouraged schools and communities to take greater ownership of curriculum; greater freedom to be creative in designing learning experiences that motivated and engaged students. It was developed as a permissive curriculum, a framework, not a prescription. So how does the espoused curriculum direction which embraces diversity gel with the initiative to install Standards?

According to the New Zealand Assessment Academy, the introduction of national standards in education, and in particular, the assessment and reporting of student and school-level data to parents and the Ministry of Education, constitutes a major break from current practice in New Zealand. They emphasise that

> National Standards need to be implemented with care and consideration to both intended and possible unintended consequences. We know from lessons learned in England and the USA such a programme of assessment can have serious negative impacts on schooling and school children.

> Crooks, Darr, Gilmore, Hall, Hattie, Smith & Smith (2009, p.2)

It is well understood among educators that standards in themselves do not raise student achievement. Internationally, research evidence is clear that good teaching and assessment rather than directive, narrowly focused National Standards are responsible for improving student achievement (Mitchell, 2009). By visioning a curriculum that positions students as competent and effective assessors of their own learning, Standards can be utilised by students, teachers and parents as a resource as opposed to a dangerous measuring stick.

There are a raft of quality assessment tools that have been developed over the last couple of decades that can inform students, teachers and parents. Fortunately, the Minister of Education has stated that assessing and reporting on national standards will build on the nationally-validated normative assessment tools that already exist (Tolley, 2009 as cited in Crooks *et al*., 2009). When schools look to themselves to establish their interpretation of NZCS they could consider a few guidelines that aim to preserve the integrity of assessment practices. Lester Flockton (2008, as cited in NZEI, 2008), states that Standards get it right when:

- they include a well balanced and interrelated set of abilities and dispositions, including those that are not readily or appropriately measurable by tests (e.g., enjoyment and engagement in reading)
- they are relative to the individual student's learning and show the progress they are making
- multiple sources of evidence are used to judge and validate performance including teachers' day-to-day observations and judgments
- they cause no harm to students
- they are sensitive to cultural and lingual differences.

These guidelines serve to enhance the validity of assessment processes. Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003, as cited in Deakin Crick, 2008, p.313) describe the development of indicators and assessment tools to evaluate and measure competence as a political act because they constitute the 'technology of control':

> ... the act of creating and using assessment tools formalises and structures what is valued in that particular community and bestows value, success and status, or failure and exclusion, depending on how the tool is used.

We see that the challenge to assess in relation to NZCS requires teachers and school leaders to consider very carefully what they value in the assessment process.

CHILDREN AS RESEARCHERS OF THEIR OWN LEARNING

The learner should be at the heart of the assessment process. By inquiring into their own achievement data students can develop an understanding of where to go next with their learning and how to get there. They own it. This requires considerable expertise on the part of the teacher. Effective assessment practice draws out the opportunity for silent – or silenced – pupils to engage with their learning and the classroom culture. For this to happen there needs to be a level of authenticity. This involves 'communicating a genuine interest in what pupils have to say: learning to listen, to offer feedback, to discuss lines of action, to explain why certain responses are not possible' (Rudduck, 2005, p.2).
     As illustrated in the USA federal policy 'No Child Left Behind', any initiative which aims to standardise education can have an enormous impact on

the quality and types of learning experiences offered in schools (Giroux, 2003). Leaving children out of assessment practice reflects a system which focuses on doing *to* more than doing *with*. Although teachers and parents/whanau may think they are doing for their child they are really positioning him or her as a passive non-participant. If students are not actively engaged in the assessment process it may not necessarily contribute to the students' self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation and knowledge about their own learning (Mitchell, 2009).

Michael Fullan poses us the question: 'What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?' (Fullan, 1991, p.70) Indeed there is clear evidence that consulting students about their learning enhances self esteem and confidence, promotes stronger engagement and motivation to learn, and encourages students to become more active members of their school community (Jelly, Fuller & Byers, 2000).

The next section of this paper illustrates how, by creating their own electronic portfolios, students can develop their assessment capabilities; selecting, interpreting, analysing, evaluating, reflecting, discussing and using quality information to enhance their learning. This process culminates in the capacity of the students to talk about their progression of learning, sharing this with parents and whanau during student led conferences and in online settings. The roles of all those involved in this learning and teaching interface merge in such a way that the student is positioned centrally, as an active sense maker of their own learning.

ENHANCING AKO THROUGH E-PORTFOLIOS

E-portfolios, when used as learning and reporting tools, can enhance whanau engagement and the learners' sense of efficacy. As learner-driven assessment tools, e-portfolios exemplify much of what the New Zealand Curriculum is aiming to achieve: encouraging students to engage in the reflective process of learning to learn. When students are in the driving seat this process can enable them to develop the capacities outlined in the New Zealand curriculum vision: to be 'confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners' (Ministry of Education, 2007). The deliberate act of power sharing reflects a sophisticated pedagogy of co-construction where teachers deliberately engage students to think about what their data means and to reach negotiated next steps. The use of models and exemplars of what this learning might look like supports students and teachers as they examine together where students are at in their learning, where they might want to be and the possibilities of how they might progress from there.

Tiniroto, a rural school located in the Tairawhiti region, promotes a co-constructive approach to learning that is based on the premise that learners are teachers and teachers are learners. This notion of ako is well embedded in the culture of the school.

E-assessment not only supports but enhances this sense of connectedness. When students at Tiniroto design an electronic presentation of their learning achievements and challenges they are utilising their own assessment data as evidence. This underpins the learning conversations the children have with peers, teachers and whanau. By evaluating their learning with teachers and whanau, these students are consistently engaging in future focussed conversations to enhance learning.

The students' portfolios align with the values outlined in the NZC. Competencies are enacted as students strive for accuracy, set goals, persevere and innovate. E-learning technologies create possibilities for students to inquire into their own learning practices and assessment data. Sixty-two percent of Tiniroto students are Maori. The Treaty of Waitangi is valued through the opportunities afforded by this electronic medium to explore and share concepts from a Maori world perspective. Cultural diversity can be celebrated. This is exemplified in the ways students select what they value in their learning to share with parents and whanau.

When assessment is embedded across all learning areas it can be exemplified in an e-portfolio in different forms. Tiniroto students' asTTle and Probe data have been captured in their e-portfolios for the students to use, in partnership with their teacher, as primary data to inform their next steps in targeting learning goals. These sources of information are triangulated in a range of ways. Running records, student-teacher conference data, asTTle reports, STAR data, reflections from teacher observations specific to learning goals, and peer feedback create a rich picture of the learner. These assessment tools and methods are triangulated through the e-portfolio.

The multimedia dimension of video footage demonstrates students' learning in ways that could never be represented on paper. This illustrates what powerful tools e-portfolios can be in the hands of those who are most empowered by them, the children themselves.

REPORTING AS DIALOGUE

A key feature to e-portfolios is that students can share their progress in relation to NZCS with their parents and whanau. When provided with classroom opportunities to engage in discursive practices around data, students develop their assessment awareness and capability. This discursive pedagogy equips students to engage in learning conversations with their parents/whanau. This process involves students engaging in rich learning conversations together. By utilising peer input, learning is co-constructed by students in the classroom with teacher support. Peers can assist each other to video aspects of their learning and upload their videos into their e-portfolios. Students who research their own learning reflect on their assessment data individually, with their peers and with their teacher. When students can identify their next steps they are positioned as the knower. The student perspective on next step action enriches the triangulated dialogue between parents/whanau, the student and the teacher. This dialogic approach can enable a synergy between the learning in school and at home. In this way a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations is developed through the reporting process.

Tiniroto School has been clustering with a group of other schools in an ICT PD initiative. The students' portfolios reflect learning experiences that have occurred through a cross-school assessment process. Students have been co-constructing achievement criteria and peer assessing with other students in other schools across the cluster. E-portfolios are regularly evaluated and moderated in order to support a coherent approach to learning across the school.

The 'reporting as dialogue' process allows Tiniroto parents/whanau to have input into and co-construct meaning around what the assessment data

highlights. Through seeing the learning via video evidence and hearing their children explain what it means, parents gain an understanding of what the learning looks like in action. In this way whanau are active participants who can be invited into feedback conversations with their children and the teacher around the learning that is taking place. This is more collaboration than consultation. Respect is fostered in the student/teacher/whanau relationships because there is the expectation that communications are positive and focused on improving learning.

Importantly, this form of reporting can circumvent the dangerous spiral of children becoming demotivated by constantly being compared to a standard they have not achieved. If this happens repeatedly they begin to believe that they cannot learn. According to Mitchell (2009, p.10),

> ... being told that 'you do not meet the standard' or that 'you are causing concern' is at odds with the notion of developing a child's self efficacy, particularly if this is reported year after year on the end of year report.

E-portfolios enable Tiniroto students to be agentic learners who monitor their own progress and take charge of their own learning. By being positioned as active decision-makers the students are assisted by their teachers to develop their assessment capability, so they can discern where they are in their progressions of learning, defining their next steps. This agency is exemplified in the way students can speak to their assessment data. An example of this is the running record data analysis, which is co-constructed between the teacher and student and is included as a scanned sample in the individual's portfolio.

The student making meaning, thinking critically and responding to the text is captured in this video clip. Through viewing the video of themselves in action students are able to see and hear their reading, able to deliberate with others on their actions and recognise, through dialogue, their next steps. Students can respond to these challenges of learning and incorporate it in their e-portfolio.

Tiniroto e-portfolios are designed to enhance student learning through reflection. They support self, peer, teacher and parent/whanau collaboration. It is important for parents to know how to talk with their children in ways that support and encourage their learning. Learning-focused dialogue around the e-portfolio enables parents to be active contributors to their children's learning. The school provides opportunities for parents to develop the capacity to engage in learning-oriented conversations with their children and teacher. The teacher has taken time to build a shared understanding with parents /whanau around what types of assessment tools are used in class to support learning. They can see from the tools profiled in the portfolio where their child sits in relation to the NZCS. The profiling by the student of his/her next steps can enhance meaningful school-home partnerships. Parents /whanau, through this process of dialogue with their child and the classroom teacher, have the chance to co-construct a learning pathway in which they can support their child at home.

Students at Tiniroto School are becoming competent assessors in their own right. They draw from all five Key Competencies as they create and utilise their e-portfolios in their learning, reflect on the progress they have made, and engage the participation of their parents/whanau. These students share the

responsibility with their teacher for selecting evidence for a range of purposes; to enhance their classroom learning and invite input from their parents/whanau in the spirit of ako.

CONCLUSION

Student agency is a key element of the New Zealand Curriculum vision – for young people to be actively involved, connected, confident, lifelong learners. If students are to be ready, willing and able to take charge of their learning (Carr, 2008) they need to have the capacity to research their own learning practice and develop their assessment expertise. If student agency can be enhanced through reporting processes, schools need to consider how NZCS can be conveyed to stakeholders in ways that empower the learners themselves and recognise their tangible achievements.

Reporting in relation to New Zealand Curriculum Standards can be embedded in rich processes of effective assessment practice. A robust reporting relationship between teacher, child and parents/whanau does not necessarily just occur naturally. Indeed, meaningful consultation can be a challenge to achieve. For parents, whanau, teachers and students to share their expertise, the student position needs to be clarified and a dialogic relationship developed. This active role is a new one, but essential, if teachers and school communities are to support students to be agentic lifelong learners.

'Ko te pae tawhiti whaia kia tata, ko te pae tata whakamaua kia tina.'

Continue seeking to bring distant horizons closer: Consolidate what you have already achieved.

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