



## **An-other Look at Assessment: Assessment in Learning**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article seeks to review understandings of educational assessment as revealed in the phrases teachers use (assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning). We propose a reconsideration of what teachers might have taken for granted in these phrases and assessment practice. We suggest that along with assessment knowledge and skills, teachers need a way of 'being in' assessment. We share some experiential stories to illustrate our understanding of 'assessment in learning' and ask readers to consider what this might mean for their own teaching practice.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As initial teacher educators involved in co-teaching professional education papers within a primary teaching degree (which includes assessment), we regularly review what we are privileging in our papers, what we take for granted in our thinking, and our practices of assessment. Our reviews also include considering whether and how such thinking might matter.

First we briefly review how we talk about assessment (our understandings and the language we use). Then we explore the understanding and potential of the phrase assessment 'in' learning. Using initial teacher education undergraduate student stories we consider the question, Does consideration of the concept of 'assessment in learning' makes sense and help the teacher to reflecting on the knowledge and practice of assessment? We conclude by explaining how we are using the phrase 'assessment in learning' and ask the reader to consider for themselves if and how this phrase might also serve them in their own teaching practice.

## PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment has more than one purpose and many interested parties. Assessment provides information that can help improve students' learning and help teachers in teaching. According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, 'The primary purpose of assessment is to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching as both student and teacher respond to the information that it provides' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 39). Hill (2008) also defines the role of assessment in a similar way but with an emphasis on students reaching their potential: 'The role of classroom assessment is to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching in order to ensure that students reach their individual potential...' (p. 136).

Teachers, therefore, generally understand that assessment is integral to teaching. We believe that assessment is linked to the teacher-student relationship and occurs within this relationship. Again we can use words from the National Curriculum document to support this understanding: 'Assessment for the purposes of improving student learning is best understood as an ongoing process that arises out of the interaction between teaching and learning' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 39). Assessment is part of getting to know students as individuals, groups and as a class. A teacher asks, What do my students know and what can they do? Assessment is the ongoing task of finding out about student's beliefs, strategies, strengths and weaknesses in relation to their learning. Indeed we can ask ourselves, 'When is a teacher not assessing?' Assessment links to students' developing understanding of the nature of science, mathematics and English etc as well as of themselves as learners, and how things work in the world around them. Assessment has links to life through goal setting and progress towards those goals. Knowing who you are, where you are, where you are going and having a sense of direction and progress are skills for life.

In our efforts to focus and describe effective assessment practice we have adopted certain vocabulary and phrases; assessment of learning, assessment for learning and, more recently, assessment as learning.

### Assessment of learning

'Assessment of learning,' also called 'assessment for summative purposes' or summative assessment (see Ussher & Earl, 2010), refers to 'formal checks of learning outcomes that are conducted at the *end* of a teaching program' (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003, p.343). Summative assessment implies more than an overview of previous learning. It should involve an accumulation of evidence collected over time, and coverage of previous learning. But it should also assist the teacher to make decisions about where future directions for learning lie (Moreland, Jones & Chambers, 2001, p.17). The summative uses of assessment can be grouped into 'internal' and 'external' to the school community. Internal uses include using regular grading for record keeping, informing decisions about courses, and reporting to parents and to the students themselves (Harlen, 2005, p. 208).

Sutton (1992) explains why such a summary of learning is needed. 'A summary is needed to provide an accurate picture of the child's learning and progress, without the burden of too much detail. Summarising often feels very

unsatisfactory. It flattens out the unique representation of the child as an individual, and sometimes produces an image more crude and blurred than we would like' (Sutton, 1992, pp. 3-4).

### **Assessment for learning**

Assessment for learning, also referred to, as 'assessment for formative purposes' is:

A range of informal and formal procedures undertaken by teachers as an integral part of the normal teaching and learning process. The information obtained via these procedures is used, by teachers and students, to modify and enhance learning and understanding.

Black & Wiliam (1998, p. 53)

Assessment for learning includes all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by the students in assessing themselves, which provides information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged.

Clarke (2005) has identified elements of formative assessment; during planning the teacher establishes explicit learning intentions, shares learning intentions and developing success criteria with the students. The teacher uses effective questioning and students' self assessment and evaluation against learning intentions in gathering formative information. Feedback may then be teacher to child, child to teacher and child to child. The aim being to raise the child's self esteem.

Bell and Cowie's (2001) model of interactive formative assessment described how during teaching and learning, the teacher *notices* student thinking, as s/he interacts with the students, *recognising* its significance for the students' development and *responding*, often immediately. This formative assessment occurs when the teacher is roving and discussing with individuals and groups during learning activities, and the findings are used to make or clarify a teaching point. Often the teacher can set out to find out specific information (*elicits*), interprets what is observed or recorded and then acts on the evidence.

### **Assessment as learning**

More recently the phrase 'assessment as learning' has been used to focus our consideration on assessment as student metacognition and as a literacy (L. Earl, 2003). The assessment as learning concept underscores that students should be valued participants in their own learning, anticipate receiving and utilising constructive feedback and feed-forward and be able to identify their own learning gaps and solve their learning needs, with teacher assistance. Through this practice students can develop skills for life-long learning and be self-motivated by learning self and peer assessment strategies. However, some say this focus allows teaching to the test, further emphasis on coaching and practice for assessment, and more formal assessment procedures such as testing to count as learning (e.g. Torrance, 2007).

In these phrases the difference is in the smallest word, *of*, *for*, and *as*. The language we use matters. We understand assessment is integral to

teaching and that teachers need to have both theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge behind their classroom assessment practice. Through study and practical experiences teachers develop capabilities in assessment language, strategies, approaches and skills. This learning is ongoing and will continue to develop over their careers. So what have we taken for granted in our assessment practices? We suggest it is time to reconsider the experience of teachers and students. We suggest a focus on assessment using the phrase, assessment *in* learning.

## **ASSESSMENT IN LEARNING**

Assessment is experiential in nature, a lived experience involving thinking, strategising, language use and activity. Those involved experience assessment. Assessment is always an experience (like it or not) and how we are 'in' the experience matters. Being-in assessment relates to our way-of-being immersed in teaching, relating and assessment, and attunement with children (Macintyre Latta, 2004), their relationships, their learning and their assessment. The nature of the 'in' is critical. The notion of 'being-in' relates to 'how we are' as a teacher, how we are 'being-with' children, how we are 'being-in' relationship and how we are 'being-in' assessment. How we are with children influences the way they experience assessment.

As such, individuals have stories to tell of how it was for them, how it felt and what it was like 'being-in' assessment (Giles & Earl, 2010). We have all heard such stories from teachers, students, parents and community members. Even at informal gatherings over a meal, the conversation can turn to stories of experiences of formal assessment such as School Certificate examinations by people whose school days are well behind them.

Re-considering teachers and students as 'being-in' assessment (Giles & Earl, 2010) draws our attention to other '-ing' words such as feeling and sensing.

- *Focusing* on students' learning in the process
- *Noticing* how children are learning, noticing particular attributes of individuals
- *Seeing* and *reading* children in the moment
- *Recognising* change/growth, misconceptions, misunderstandings
- *Responding* and *acting* on what is noticed.

Noticing, recognising and responding are all words from Bell and Cowie's model of interactive formative assessment (2001) discussed earlier. They explained the importance of teacher knowledge because this knowledge allows teachers to interpret student words and products to gain some understanding of student thinking; to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, to recognise something of importance and to be able to act on this information to further learning.

Teacher dispositions are integral to how teachers notice and what they notice. A teacher's attitude and mood will make a difference to their observations and perceptions of what is observed. Assessment as noticing is an

embodied experience of being-in teaching, present, and open towards children and their learning.

A teacher's sensitivities and sensibilities are critical to their tacit knowing, practice knowledge, and experience in acting on what is noticed. While particular assessment tasks are planned and implemented, the continuous nature of assessment means teachers find themselves 'in' relational experiences, capturing glimpses of learning and looking for their responses to children and children's responses to them.

## STORIES TO ILLUSTRATE

Now we turn our attention to some stories to illustrate and support our proposition that assessment 'in' learning matters. These stories have been gathered from online asynchronous discussions with third year undergraduate teacher education students in two papers focused on professional practice and assessment. These students were informed prior to discussion of the intended use of their contributions. Stories were gathered from a survey of online group discussion after the conclusion of the course. These stories were shared by students with the whole class to illustrate their thinking about assessment and in response to the question: Does consideration of the concept of 'assessment in learning' make sense and help you in reflecting on your knowledge and practice of assessment as a teacher?

One notices, recognises and responds:

*So I was watching one particular boy and I quietly pulled him outside. I said, can you give me a hand to pull this desk out? When we were outside I said to him, hey is the work too hard for you? And he just sort of looked at me with his big eyes. That's alright boy, you can tell me, is the work too hard for you? And he just stood there and shook his head. And I said, you just go and sit down again, I'll change it for you. So that's why – it's too hard for him! The eyes give it away – they do. You can see it in kids. It's amazing actually how much the eyes actually tell you. (I11: S12)*

This is a story of a teacher being 'in' an assessment moment. This teacher sensed something wasn't right. The child has been noticed. The teacher saw the situation with sensitivity, had a private respectful talk and even though the child said nothing the teacher experienced the unspoken and the child experienced being seen by the teacher. Van Manen (2002) suggests that 'real seeing is more than the eyes'. 'Being seen is more than being acknowledged. For a child it means experiencing being seen by the teacher' (p. 31). Teachers listen with their whole body on alert to 'read' children.

One student teacher spoke of sensing what cannot be seen and another about the assessment 'space':

*I have been in a class where I can sense something is wrong. If I look around there does not seem to be anything out of place, but if you stop and really look there is always a clue which indicates a problem ... An example of this that stands out for me was during my first year practicum. I had a particularly tough class of year 7 and 8*

*students. I had divided the students into two groups and we were doing a quiz. Everything appeared normal on the surface and the students were interacting well. However, very quickly all hell let loose. One boy rushed across the room, over desks etc and started punching a boy in the other group. ...My point here is that if I had had more experience I would have been tuned in to the atmosphere that was building in the class and maybe diffused the situation before it happened. That incident taught me a lot about observation and being alert to what is going on beneath the surface in the classroom. (SS, 22-4-2010, B#18)*

*What I am trying to get my head around right now is the intimate 'space' in which the teacher-student relationship is transacting (particularly in assessment) and the simultaneous and recursive interactions that are occurring.. ...the teacher has to keep the assessment space clean and safe for the student. I also think the teacher needs to keep the 'space' open and welcoming for the student's assessment. (SB 22-4-2010, A#20)*

Assessment is a continuous relational encounter that draws upon teachers' and students' sensibilities in terms of their noticing and valuing (Giles & Earl, 2011). What may seem obvious under certain conditions can get lost in the busyness of a classroom. Attuning to individual students takes focus and time. Tait and Martin (2007, p.39) said that 'in our quest to truly personalise learning for each and every one of our students, we continue to listen in depth to what they are saying'.

Two student teachers expressed important realisations that they had come to through practical experience developing their knowledge, practice and 'being':

*I also think that it is really important to listen to your students to assess where they are at. Not just at the end but right from the start of a topic. (KR, 22-4-2010, C#10)*

*I learned a lot last year about standing back and listening to students discussions as they try and problem solve without the teacher's intervention. .. Knowing your students and their habits, body language etc will help us know when to interject and when to let the learning flow. (GN, 23-4-2010,B#27)*

Between noticing and responding is the important stage of recognising:

*I think there were times in my last prac where I did not see the significance in some of the learning that was occurring in the classroom, through lack of experience, whereas now I have a lot more detectors at the ready! (RM, 20-4-2010 B#6)*

Being in assessment, teaching and relating is an embodied experience. More than relying only on rational observations, sometimes it is our body that

responds before we consciously notice or recognise what is happening. One student teacher observed sensing something that required noticing:

*I find some classroom issues always leave a funny feeling in my tummy after it has occurred. There is a lot of self-reflection afterwards, did I do the right thing or could I have handled that differently? (H10:D10)*

Teacher dispositions and sensitivities are integral to how children and their learning are noticed by teachers. Teachers 'read' students and this information explicitly, or intuitively, is part of a teacher's response to students as this might assist in the direction and nature of a student's learning. As teachers we have the choice to use what we sense to respond or to leave things as they are. We can step forward to take action that may make a difference.

*An experience I had was in the classroom with a boy who was quite intelligent but was not motivated to do much, who was normally getting detentions, and whom staff were becoming tired and weary of. Anyway, after a brief talk with him during his detention, I clearly explained to him that I knew his capabilities and that I expected him to live up to them. After that he "instantly" became a different kid. He came back into class, and for the whole time I was at that school, he worked, was really helpful and didn't play up. (AS, 21-4-2010, #A2)*

Assessment is as integral to teaching as looking, listening and talking together. The relationship between teacher and student is therefore very important in assessment. Teachers and students both experience assessment and have stories about their experience. Which brings us to the questions: What is the nature of our assessment experience? What stories do you have? What stories will your students have?

## **CONCLUSION**

We use the phrase 'assessment in learning' to reconsider our practice. We advocate the revisiting of our student's experience of assessment. Can an experiential concern for assessment balance the privileging of conceptual understandings and pragmatic skill development? Will the concept of 'assessment in learning' focus our attention on being-in assessment as a relationship and remind us that assessment has an ongoing nature. We believe this focus will allow teachers to explore the value-laden nature of how we are 'in' assessment. We believe we need to include 'being' along side teachers' knowing and doing.

As teachers we create assessment experiences and we can explore our own and our students' experiences of assessment. What do these stories show about the experiential nature of assessment and the subtleties of assessment practice? How can these experiences be used to evoke a greater attunement, noticing, and concern for how we teachers are being 'in' assessment?

Teachers need to have a professional knowledge of assessment (knowing). They need to have skills in professional practices of assessment (doing) and teachers also need to show a professional way of being in assessment. More than an ongoing process, improving student learning through assessment practice is an embodied process that arises out of the interactive relational space between teacher and learner.

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