Self-assessment: What Teachers Think

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1. Self-assessment: What teachers think

This investigation was an exploration of a small group of teachers' interpretations of self-assessment, both in theory and in practice. Teachers talked about their beliefs about self-assessment, the extent to which they supported the use of self-assessment strategies in their classrooms, and ways they went about this. They identified conditions that were enabling for student self-assessment, as well as barriers and challenges they faced. The research is therefore framed from the teachers' perspectives, although comparisons are drawn to findings from other research.

Summary of findings

The teachers in this study did find self-assessment challenging to implement. However, this is not surprising when the conditions that are necessary to ensure its success are examined.

This small investigation of teachers' experiences of using student self-assessment strategies in their classrooms suggests there are several points to consider.

- Teachers' beliefs about learning are fundamental to whether they will provide the space for students to use self-assessment strategies.
- Before self-assessment can be an effective part of students' learning, teachers have to develop a classroom culture where students are active rather than passive learners, believe that they can learn, are motivated to want to learn, and are given choices about their learning.
- Students must be taught how to use self-assessment. Both teachers and students need to accept that first efforts will not be perfect, that students will need scaffolding to use the tools effectively, and that students will need different levels of support.
- Different students respond better to different self-assessment strategies. Students should be exposed to a range of strategies and encouraged to independently adopt those that help them learn best.
- Sustained and planned professional development is a necessary component of developing a school-wide culture of self-assessment, as is strong leadership.
- Time is an important factor—it takes time to embed self-assessment into everyday practice, it takes time for students to be able to use self-assessment strategies successfully, and time needs to be allowed for students to practice self-assessment.

What is self-assessment?

The research with teachers was preceded by a review of the current literature about self-assessment to provide a framework for considering teachers' reported practices in their classrooms. A summary of the main points follows.

Assessment can be defined as collecting information on student learning or performance based on various sources of evidence. In actual fact, though, the term assessment is frequently used more broadly to incorporate not only the collection of evidence, but also judgements made about the work based on this evidence, monitoring of progress toward a goal or standard, and reflecting on learning processes and engagement with the learning.

Self-assessment, then, is when the student him/herself is involved in some or all aspects of the assessment process.

Like any other assessment, there can be different purposes for self-assessment. Self-assessment can be summative, for example when a student marks their own work from an answer sheet. In this case, there is not usually an expectation on the student to use the assessment to further their learning (although some students may choose to use it in this way, and sometimes teachers may provide support for them to do so). However, when self-assessment is referred to in research literature in the area of assessment-for-learning the stated purpose is formative, that is, to move students' learning closer to a goal or standard.

Boud (1994) describes the "defining characteristic" of self-assessment as "the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards". He adds that, "it normally involves drawing upon the criteria and judgement of others, but leaves decision-making in the hands of the student".

For students to learn from assessment they not only have to gather evidence of their learning, but also:

- analyse their work in terms of the goal/standard;
- make decisions about what they need to do to improve;
- know what to do to close the gap; and
- monitor their progress towards achieving this.

Self-assessment within this framework includes elements of self-evaluation and self-monitoring. Sometimes self-assessment tasks require students to be self-reflective, which may involve thinking about how they best learn, whether they selected the most appropriate learning strategies, and what attitudes they brought to the task. Self-assessment therefore sits within the bigger picture of self-regulation, which Zimmerman (2001) describes as students being "metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning" (p. 5). Table 1 summarises different aspects of self-regulation, and identifies the reference points for the judgements made.

Table 1 **Elements of self-regulation**

	What students do	**Reference points for judgements**
Self-assessment	Collect evidence of learning and interpret meaning of evidence.	Personal goal, external standard
Self-evaluation	Compare their work.	Goal, criteria, exemplar, feedback
Self-correction	Make changes or adjustments. Set new goals.	Goal, criteria, exemplar, feedback
Self-monitoring	Monitor progress towards closing the gap or reaching amended goal	Goal, criteria, exemplar
Self-reflection	Think about processes, thinking, dispositions towards task	Expressed notions of what learning entails

Why is self-assessment important?

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) puts an emphasis on assessment for the purpose of improving students' learning. Self-assessment has been identified as a key factor in effective assessment for learning (see for example Black & Wiliam, 1998, Crooks, 1988, Sadler, 1998). Only the student can do the actual learning, and so they need to know what they are aiming for, be able to interpret evidence of where they are at, be able to recognise what quality looks like, and have strategies for closing the gap between the their work and the target. They also need to be given the opportunity and time to engage in self-assessment. This leads to students becoming more independent, more motivated, and more able (Absolum et al, 2009).

How does self-assessment help learning?

High performing students self-monitor, self-correct, and use feedback (including feedback from their peers) to inform their learning. So what is it about using these strategies that leads to better learning?

Feedback that is descriptive rather than evaluative encourages students to self-critique and check their work for the elements mentioned in the feedback, and is more likely to lead to students taking more responsibility for their own learning.

Students most often receive feedback from their teachers. However, feedback from peers can also be very powerful, both for the givers and receivers of feedback. Peer assessment can be a collaborative process between students, although to achieve this, students must be clear what the learning goal and success criteria are, and teachers must teach students how they can help one another with their learning (Wiliam, 2006). Feedback from peers is likely to remove issues of who holds the power in the feedback relationship, and students have also commented that their peers know what sorts of words to use to explain things more clearly (Cowie, 2005). The act of giving feedback helps students clarify their own understandings, because, when doing so they are required to internalise the criteria for quality work (Wiliam, 2006). This interaction between peer-

and self-assessment, referred to as "activating students as learning resources for one another" (Wiliam, 2006, p. 3), has been shown to produce large learning gains (Slavin et al, 2003, cited in Wiliam, 2006).

However, feedback on its own will not necessarily ensure effective self-assessment. Sadler (2009) suggests that students can only assess themselves when they have a clear picture of the targets their learning is meant to attain. Students "need to be trained how to interpret feedback, how to make connections between feedback and characteristics of their work, and how they can improve" (Sadler, 1998, p. 78). Students, then, must be taught and given time to practice self-assessment strategies, so they are meaningful. Having access to a range of exemplars of different ways that good work might look like is important for helping students to make decisions about the value of their own work.

Self-assessment can also lead to increased intrinsic motivation by increasing students' responsibility towards their own learning. When they understand what steps to take to improve their work and how to go about this, they are more likely to be prepared to commit to this. However, Brookhart (2001) warns that persistence depends on expectations of ultimate success. Others (for example, Cowie, 2005) claim that the criteria students use influence learning. Reliance on external authority (for example the teacher) tends to disempower students, so it is more effective to involve students in co-constructing criteria.

Teachers' implementation of self-assessment into their classroom programmes.

In their evaluation of the Assessment to Learn (AtoL) contracts, Poskitt and Taylor (2008b) reported that the uptake of self-assessment strategies to support assessment for learning (AfL) was slower than other aspects of formative assessment. Engaging in self-assessment requires changes in teachers' perceptions of:

- Their role;
- Students' beliefs about themselves as learners, and how they learn;
- The nature of classroom dialogue; and
- The use of feedback (Black & William, 2005, cited in Poskitt & Taylor, 2008b).

They suggest this is particularly difficult when "teachers' theoretical understanding of pedagogy and curriculum content is limited" (Speck & Knipe, 2001, cited in Poskitt & Taylor, 2008a p. 25).

Teachers often have difficulty putting research into practice. Teachers will not take up ideas if these are presented as general principles which leave them the task of translating into classroom practice. They need a variety of concrete examples of implementation (Wiliam & Lee, 2001).

The underpinning principle of self-assessment is student autonomy, but a study completed by Marshall and Drummond (2006) identified that learning autonomy was rarely promoted in practice. Teachers see greater involvement of students in their learning as requiring them (the

teachers) to give up control of their classrooms, and this is scary for them (Wiliams, 2006, Rolheiser & Ross, 2003, Bull, 2009). Fundamental changes in the relationships between teachers and students are required (Rolheiser & Ross, 2003), and this involves teachers changing ingrained habits and routines (Wiliam, 2006).

Marshall and Drummond (2006) distinguish between teachers who follow the "letter" versus those who follow the "spirit" of an initiative- the former follow the rules or procedures taught to them, while the latter adhere to the underlying principles. They suggest that teachers' beliefs about learning impact on the way they apply their professional development learning in the classroom, and therefore debates about learning should go hand in hand with practical activities if deep change in practice is to occur. Teachers' practice is ripe for modification when teachers begin to understand the nature of the gap between their current practice and how they view themselves as professionals (Coffey *et al,* 2005, cited in Marshall and Drummond 2006). Changing teachers' beliefs, behaviours and relationships takes time. Wiliam (2007) advocates that these changes need to be taken in small steps.

The research

What we did

This research project was designed to reveal teachers' notions of self-assessment, and the ways these are translated into their classroom practice. There were two main areas of exploration, teacher beliefs, and self-assessment strategies. Two methods were used to collect data—a series of focus group interviews and a small case study. The case study is described separately.

Focus group interviews

Most[1] of the schools in the Wellington region that were undergoing AtoL professional development in 2009 or had been involved in AToL since 2005 were invited to participate in the study. The sample included schools from deciles 5 to 10, small, medium and large schools, different types of schools, e.g., contributing, full primary, intermediate, co-ed and single sex secondary, and schools with large numbers of Māori and Pacific students to schools with very few of these students. Initially teachers within these schools self selected. Where a curriculum area (in secondary schools) or range of levels (in primary schools) was poorly represented, the research team also used their own networks and approached other individuals to participate.

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[1] We did not invite schools that were geographically distant from others as this would have made it difficult to schedule focus groups.

Four teacher focus group interviews and one individual interview[2] were held over a three week period in May. The focus groups comprised:

1. Two Year 1–4 teachers

2. Four Year 7–8 teachers

3. Three secondary English subject teachers

4. Three secondary mathematics or science subject teachers[3]

One Year 5/6 teacher was interviewed.

Two researchers from NZCER facilitated each focus group (and the individual interview). Each lasted approximately 60 minutes.

In the focus group interviews the teachers were asked to mark on a continuum how often they used self-assessment in their classroom and how high a priority they placed on self-assessment in their teaching practice. They next compared and discussed any mismatch between their priority and their practice. Specific questions were then explored in the focus group discussions. These included: What does self-assessment look like to you? What is its purpose? Who benefits? What are the issues/barriers to implementing self-assessment in the classroom?

Teachers were also asked to discuss the following questions related to self-assessment: What could examples of self-assessment look like? How would you use them? Who would use them? What purpose do they have? Some teachers also discussed examples of students' self-assessment that they had brought with them.

The teachers' responses were analysed by grouping them under emergent themes. The different focus group responses were colour coded, and each teacher was numbered. This initial analysis revealed patterns of responses from both individual teachers and teachers of different year levels or, in the case of secondary teachers, curriculum areas.

What we found out

The main reason for carrying out this research was to further explore the observation that teachers are slower to include self-assessment strategies in their classrooms than other Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies (Poskitt & Taylor, 2008b). While our study was limited to a small group of teachers' perceptions about self-assessment, the data does tend to confirm this assertion. However, an analysis of the teachers' discussions also suggests that there are good reasons for this. In this section we give a brief summary of the range of experiences in self-assessment of the

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[2] A Year 5–6 focus group was planned but only one teacher at this level attended, hence the individual interview.
[3] English, science and mathematics secondary teachers were interviewed as these are the ARCT curriculum areas.

focus group teachers; we then examine three factors that seemed to impact on the teachers' ability to successfully implement self-assessment—professional support, beliefs about learning, and classroom climate.

The focus group teachers

The focus group teachers, according to their own evaluations, ranged from those for whom self-assessment played a minor role in their classrooms to those for whom self-assessment, both planned and unplanned, was part of the daily classroom routine. The latter group reported being confident and proactive about supporting students to develop self-assessment skills. They provided opportunities for self-assessment throughout the day in a range of curriculum areas. Some teachers also provided opportunities for students to assess how well they were managing aspects of their behaviour. Teachers at the other end of the continuum either said that self-assessment was unimportant, or they were unable to clearly articulate what self-assessment strategies look like. The teachers who fell between these two extremes generally said that they felt self-assessment was important, but they were finding it challenging to implement, for a variety of reasons. They discussed fewer self-assessment strategies than the confident group, and their use was usually confined to one or two curriculum areas.

In a study of primary school teachers undergoing professional development to implement formative assessment practices into their classrooms, Webb and Jones (2009) identified three levels of classroom practice—trialling, integrating, and embedded.

- Teachers at the **trialling** level were using formative assessment in some parts of their classroom practice, but not systematically. They tended to think about changes they needed to be making and how these affected students.
- At the **integrating** level there had been a change in classroom practice involving both students and teachers, and a range of strategies was being used. However, this was happening more frequently and successfully in some areas than others.
- The characteristics of the teachers **and** students operating at the **embedded** level included integration of these practices throughout all the teaching and learning, teachers and students using a wide range of strategies, and changes in students' and teachers' behaviours.

These levels are useful for summarising the practice described by the focus group teachers in this study, although there was also a small group who did not divulge any relevant professional development and whose practice did not match any of the described levels.

Professional support

Professional support was mentioned as one of the most important factors in implementing self-assessment by almost all the teachers working at the embedded level as well as by the integrated group.

Two main types of professional development were described by the focus group teachers—either AtoL, which has a focus on goal setting around outcomes, or ideas about building learning power (BLP) based on Guy Claxton's (2008) work, focusing on learning to learn strategies.

All of the teachers at the embedded level had undertaken ongoing and sustained professional development that had included some aspect of empowering students in their learning. Usually this was AtoL training (which was also the model of professional development evaluated by Poskitt and Taylor). They had started by applying AfL practices in one curriculum area. In most cases further professional development, usually in numeracy or literacy, helped them to either transfer what they were doing into other areas, or build up their confidence in the initial area. They had eventually included AfL strategies in most areas of their teaching, often including self-management competencies.

Other teachers had participated in professional development relatively recently or were currently undergoing it, including teachers from one school who were working with ideas about BLP. This "trial" level group of teachers were only implementing self-assessment strategies in, for the most part, one area. In primary schools this was likely to be in literacy, but in secondary schools the classes where it was introduced were more varied. Some secondary teachers identified younger students, one discussed NCEA students, one a class focussing on an inquiry learning model, and another on her home class.

Another common factor for the embedded level teachers appeared to be that their schools had developed a shared understanding among their staff over time. There was an expectation that self-assessment was part of classroom practice, even when this was not written into policies. One teacher described this as "the way we do things round here". A culture of sharing what they were doing with other teachers was present, and several teachers mentioned how important it was to have all staff on board.

Strong leadership was also seen by the teachers as being crucial. School leaders played important roles such as giving teachers permission to be learners, providing evidence that their efforts were making a difference, and generally sustaining momentum. Once a learning culture was established, structures needed to be put in place to ensure that AfL strategies such as self-assessment remained embedded in practice.

The focus groups' observations point to the fact that schools need to make a long-term commitment to changing teachers' practices, and to fostering a supportive culture in the school. The teachers found it challenging, especially before the benefits were apparent, to keep the momentum going, and the support of leaders and/or other teachers was claimed to play a major part in achieving this. Ad hoc and spasmodic implementation only served to frustrate teachers, created resistance from students, and teachers struggled to bring about change in either their or their students' practice.

There is evidence from the focus group discussions that teachers found it challenging to implement self-assessment in the initial stages. There is also evidence that, given time and

adequate support, at least some teachers who have had AtoL professional development reach the stage where AfL strategies become part of the everyday classroom practice.

Beliefs about learning

Beliefs about learning (and assessment) were a second important factor affecting how the focus group teachers included self-assessment as part of their classroom practice. Those teachers who felt that self-assessment was a very low priority tended to have a narrow view of what constitutes self-assessment, for example, students marking their own work right or wrong (thereby serving a summative purpose), students saying they understand when the teacher checked so they could continue teaching, etc. Some of them also talked about not trusting the students' judgements. Some teachers expressed reservations about students being able to carry out self-assessment, saying that they were unrealistic about their achievements, either selling themselves short or thinking they know everything. The teachers who were not deliberately including self-assessment strategies at all in their classroom practices were those most likely to express a transmissive view of learning where learning is seen as the transmission of knowledge or skills from the teacher to the student. The learner has a relatively passive role. The corresponding view of assessment is that the product or output is what is important to assess. Assessment is a planned event, and an authoritative judgement is made and documented for summative and accountability purposes. Self-assessment is not regarded as important because the learner does not have the authority to make the judgement.

The majority of the focus group teachers seemed to place high value on students' self-assessment and expressed beliefs that were aligned with a more participatory view of learning. From this perspective learning is seen as a process that requires the active participation of the learner. All students are capable of becoming better learners, and the teacher's job is to help them do this. The corresponding view of assessment is that only the student really knows what learning has occurred and it is the student therefore who is best placed to make judgements about their learning, not some outside authority. In this view, students must be involved in self-assessment.

Some of these teachers were able to discuss a range of self-assessment strategies they used frequently with their students. Others professed to value self-assessment but admitted that they didn't provide opportunities for it to happen as often as they thought they should.

There appeared to be a closer alignment between the beliefs and practices of those teachers who had participated in a sustained period of professional development around formative assessment compared with those who had not. Teachers who were relatively new to, for example, AtoL professional development, or whose professional development had not been sustained were able to talk about what they personally believed about learning, but when they described their practice they seemed more focussed on the strategies rather than the underlying principles, i.e., they were following the rules.

The teachers who were introducing BLP strategies to their students could talk about the philosophy of what they were trying to achieve, although there appeared to be varying degrees of

confidence about both their success with equipping students with the skills to be reflective learners, and transferring building learning power strategies to more than one area.

The idea of students being independent and self-monitoring learners was attractive to most of the focus group teachers. However, as Wiliam (2007) cautions, teachers' thinking can change without their practice changing. So, if teachers' views of learning are consistent with theories of learning that underpin a participatory view of learning and assessment, and they have been taught what to do to embed AfL strategies, why is it so difficult to make these changes?

Changing the culture of the classroom

The third dimension to consider is the students. Using self-assessment strategies is as much about students' beliefs and practices as it is about teachers'.

A number of teachers talked about difficulties with getting students engaged with self-assessment. These ranged from students starting school who had to get accustomed to the idea that there was room for improvement in anything they did, middle primary school students who "got a bit bored" with setting and monitoring goals, to secondary students who either thought it was a waste of time, or not relevant to passing credits for NCEA. Students seem to have a number of strategies for avoiding real engagement in self-assessment. These, according to the teachers, include setting "trite" goals, not identifying an action to achieve the goal, repeating the same goal because it was yet to be achieved, and being compliant without really engaging. One teacher recounted how she had asked a group of secondary girls to keep a reflective journal, but, when she surveyed them at the end, was disappointed because, although they had gone through the process of keeping the journal as she had asked them to do, they could not see any benefit to their learning.

On the other hand, some teachers, both primary and secondary, spoke with enthusiasm of students who were taking more and more responsibility for their learning. One teacher remarked that he was amazed at how honest and aware his (junior secondary) students are. He felt that most students are more willing to reflect on their learning in a journal than they are to talk about it. Others, especially at the senior primary level, talked about the deep discussions that students had about their learning, and how the class operated as a learning community.

Not only teachers, but also students have a range of views about learning and how they see themselves as learners. Some teachers described actions that suggested many students had a passive view of learning—information is passed from the teacher to the learner. These students were not interested in engaging with strategies that required them to think about learning, because they were focused on producing the product, getting credits towards NCEA, for example. One focus group suggested that by the time they get to secondary school many students already have a history of failure to learn, and they prefer to not try rather than fail. These students clearly have a view of intelligence as a fixed commodity that they cannot change.

Students who believe that they can get better through their own efforts, on the other hand, clearly have a view of learning as something they have control over. They see assessment events as opportunities for learning rather than a judgement of how intelligent they are.

All the teachers agreed that there are challenges to getting students engaged in self-assessment. Even those who spoke positively mentioned that, when they got a new class or sometimes even new students to a class, they had to begin again.

Related to this is that the older the students were when self-assessment strategies were being introduced, the more resistant they seemed to be to engaging with them. This may simply be an age factor or the pressure of an exam culture. However, it may also be that teachers assume that older students know what to do and why they are doing it, and so provide less scaffolding than primary teachers. Secondary teachers certainly seemed to have more success when they used strategies where students were actively involved in critiquing their work in some ways. Setting goals did not seem to be so effective in engaging students of this age, at least initially.

For strategies such as peer and self-assessment to be effective, a change in classroom culture is required. The contradiction between the teacher's beliefs about learning and the existing culture of the classroom is "a driving force for change" (Webb & Jones, 2009, p. 176). Until this change takes place, teachers are likely to be applying AfL strategies to the letter (sticking to the rules) rather than applying them to the spirit (adhering to the underlying principle) (Marshall & Drummond, 2006).

The focus group teachers sticking to the rules, that is the strategies and processes they were shown during professional development, are likely to see barriers the students put up as the fault of the student. Those who understand the underlying principles look for ways to adapt strategies to suit the needs of their students. One noticeable difference between teachers who felt confident about self-assessment and those who didn't was that the former were comfortable about working from where students were at in using self-assessment and accepting their attempts as legitimate learning in progress. They also were aware that students have to learn how to self-assess, just as they have to learn to read, do mathematics, or catch a ball, and that it is the teachers' job to scaffold them as they learn. Self-assessment should not be seen by either teachers or students as an "add-on", but rather it should be infused through the day to day learning programme (Powell, 2008).

The focus group teachers did not specifically talk about what caused them to change their classroom climate, but there were some hints. For example, for some the frustration of getting the students engaged in self-assessment suggests that these teachers' classroom culture may not have matched their views of learning, whereas those operating at the "embedded" level had brought about these changes to match their beliefs. Changing the classroom climate involves changing the dynamics of power in the classroom, and changing students' beliefs about learning. It includes providing opportunities for students to practise learning, and using self-assessment strategies in a way that is effective for particular groups of students.

Self-assessment strategies

As part of this research, it was intended that we collect examples of self-assessment strategies that teachers used. However, it was apparent that the teachers mostly used and adapted strategies that are known AfL strategies, so summarising these is not particularly useful.

More important than what strategy is used, is **how** it is used. Many of the teachers were creative about selecting and adapting strategies that suited their students. One teacher of young students, for example, talked about a previous class that had a lot of girls in it. Written self-assessments worked well for this group. The next year she had a class with a number of challenging and boisterous boys. She found written self-assessment did not work with this class, and she had to introduce snappy, active strategies to get these boys engaged in self-assessment. One secondary school teacher found that students were much more reflective keeping journals than they were orally, whereas a new entrant teacher, for obvious reasons, had developed with his students a classroom culture where students frequently discussed their learning. Yet another teacher had developed a fun and motivating way for students to monitor their homework behaviour. These examples are consistent with teachers who are developing a classroom culture that takes into account students' preferred ways of doing things.

Goal setting – an example of teacher practice

The focus groups provided us with a broad view of the issues facing teachers as they attempt to implement self-assessment strategies. The following case study adds to this picture by providing a narrow but in depth view of one aspect of self-assessment. It describes one school's experiment with adapting an AfL strategy, goal setting, with the intention of providing more space for students to engage with their own learning agenda rather than their teachers.

The case study provides one example of a school that has identified an area where the teachers' beliefs about learning and their actual practice are incongruent, and how they deliberately planned to change their approach. The case study illustrates the main message of the research as a whole – effective self-assessment requires an appropriate classroom culture. Students have to be active learners, believe that they are able to learn, and are given choices to learn. This is easy to say but not so easy to do, because it involves both teachers and students reimagining their roles. Self-assessment cannot be regarded as an add-on to what teachers and students have been doing before, but requires subtle and deliberate changes; a conscious refocusing of what is the centre of attention.

Case Study

The case study school is a full primary, situated in a suburban area. It is ethnically diverse and has a low decile rating. The two teachers we worked with had middle school classes. They were already working with NZCER researchers as part of the *Lifelong Literacy* project on the integration of key competencies and reading.

The school's beliefs about assessment

This school sees the teacher's job as creating opportunities for the students to learn. Assessment is very much secondary to the creation of these opportunities. Assessment has, however, been considered carefully within the school, and is conceptualised in ways which clearly reflect school culture.

The ideas about assessment presented by the principal and staff we worked with rested on the premise that teachers will never be able to really get inside students' heads. According to this view, they will never be able to comment with any certainty about what has and has not been learned until, that is, they observe a student *applying* their learning. The teacher will not be able to predict when, or in what form, application will occur—patience and openness to the huge variety of application are essential qualities in teachers whose assessment practices stem from this premise. What is perhaps most significant, given this project's exploration of *self-assessment*, is the school's hypothesis that application of learning might necessarily involve self-assessment (although it was conceded that, as yet, no one knows for sure).

> It's application. If we see the kids applying learning, they must have processed their learning in a way that involved *some* form of self-assessment. (Principal)

Setting up conditions conducive to self-assessment

The school's focus on student application of learning relates to their belief that the teacher should not attempt to dictate what is learnt. Rather, it is the student who should, and probably always will, make this decision, regardless of how much the teacher may try to take control. When a student has the space to determine what they learn, the teacher's role then becomes that of identifier and observer of how the student chooses to apply their learning.

The teachers concluded that their practice did not quite emulate their beliefs about student agency, specifically that they could do more to make sure their students had a large amount of control over their learning.

> We've got to stop hijacking the kids' thinking! (Teacher)

They decided that opening up learning intentions so they were broad enough for students to be able to interpret them in their own way would be one way to increase student control. They also decided to pay closer attention to the scaffolding they were offering students (they had long since

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rejected the idea of success criteria, believing criteria tended to constrict the ability of students to make their own meaning, but had not yet found an acceptable alternative.) In the place of success criteria, the teachers began to more clearly identify and communicate the scaffolding they used to help the students explore the learning intention.

It was believed that once lessons were based on open learning intentions and scaffolding, as opposed to narrow learning intentions and predetermined criteria for success, the students would have more space for meaning making (theirs, not the teacher's), more space to apply it in their own way, and as part of that application, more space for self-assessment.

Putting the ideas into practice

The principal and staff had, for some time, thought their students needed to learn to have more empathy with each other. Through working with NZCER researchers on the *Lifelong Literacy* project, they had investigated the possibility that empathy can be developed through reading fiction: because the reader of fiction is required to imagine themselves in the position of the character, they become less censorious, and more empathetic (for more on the idea that reading fiction helps develop social skills, see Djikic et al., 2009; Mar, et al., 2005; and Mar, et al., 2008).

Lessons were developed which were based on open learning intentions and scaffolding designed to help the students explore the learning intention. The following example is an amalgam of several lessons taught by the two teachers:

Open learning intention: We are learning to understand Chester. (Chester is a character in the picture book *A Pocket Full of Kisses* (Penn, 2006). Chester, a racoon, feels his little brother is taking his place in his mother's affections. The story follows how Chester's mother gently reassures him of her love for him.)

Scaffolding: Over a series of lessons the teachers helped their students explore the learning intention through providing the scaffolding bullet pointed below. (Note that the students were not judged according to whether or not they used the scaffolding. The scaffolding was purely a support system for them to choose to use as they saw fit.)

The construction of the Chester character was explored through his:

• Actions (including body language)

• Dialogue

The teachers supported the students to identify numerous concrete examples of Chester's actions and dialogue in the text, asking "What is Chester doing that tells you he's feeling sad?" Student responses included:

> He's crying.

> He's got his mouth open like he can't believe it.

As they did so, the teachers also helped feed in the abstract language needed to describe his actions and dialogue—words such as "jealous" and "envious". The teachers then provided the students with a model of how to apply learning to their own lives, asking "Have you ever felt like Chester?" Student responses included:

> …when my little brother gets takeaways and I don't.

> When I see the twins get stuff I don't get…I feel like Gran doesn't like me any more.

Finally, the teachers provided the students with a model of self-assessment, asking "What do you think we can learn from reading about Chester?" (Note that while the teachers certainly acknowledged the following responses as examples of applied learning involving self-assessment, the responses were regarded as only a rehearsal for the school's ultimate goal—*independent* application of learning in a new context.) Student responses included:

> Parents can love you all the time, even when they love someone else.

> Mums know how to share the love around.

Where to next?

The next steps outlined below are consistent with the teachers' interest in balancing curriculum content with a focus on the process of learning.

The teachers were already skilled in vocabulary development—they routinely support their students with matching abstract language to concrete examples in text. They are now in a position to take advantage of the vocabulary learning opportunities they create by introducing student self reflection into their lessons. Students might simply ask themselves about the *product* of their learning:

> What new word did I learn?

> What is an example of it in the text?

The exploration of the Chester character through what he does (action) and says (dialogue) was a form of direct instruction the teachers had not used before. This instruction gave the students knowledge and skills about character construction which they may later apply to new contexts. Now they have some of the necessary knowledge and skills, the students will be able to reflect on the *process* of their learning by asking themselves:

> What did I use to help me understand Chester?

> Was it enough?

> What else could I have used?

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