

EDITORIAL

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Welcome to the first issue of *Assessment Matters*. This new journal provides a forum for discussing, debating and communicating developments and advances in matters relating to assessment in the field of education. It invites researchers, practitioners and policy makers to “push the thinking” in assessment. The goal is to advance our understanding of the science of assessment, recognise the art that accompanies it, and acknowledge the craftsmanship that makes it contextually relevant and meaningful. The frequently used expression “fit for purpose assessment” captures, but also disguises, the complexities and intricacies of realising effective assessment.

We see *assessment as science* when we measure the skills, knowledge and attitudes of students. It involves precision and robustness, validity and reliability, testing and scoring, and the gathering of evidence. We see *assessment as art* when we use the results of that science to interpret the evidence about students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes. It involves evaluating the evidence and making decisions about appropriate future actions. It includes professional expertise and knowledge, but also intuition and the occasional inferential leap. It is an integral partner to teaching and learning and a key to sound, balanced reporting. We see *assessment as craftsmanship* when we place these activities within their contexts and see the seven-year-old lurking behind the stanines and make an insightful decision about how to proceed instructionally with that child. It includes understanding and appreciating the nature, diversity and roles of the educational players (teachers, students, parents), optimising the educational opportunities afforded by the educational setting for learning, and creating a cultural climate conducive to effective learning.

The complexity of assessment as science, art and artistry is embodied in assessment for learning (AfL). The ideal of AfL (to improve learning) is well understood, the power of its use in a wide variety of educational settings is well recognised, and the integral relationship with teaching and learning is emphasised. AfL practices are becoming well embedded

in educational policies and in effective teaching practices across many different educational settings. Participants at the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning in Dunedin,¹ describe AfL as “part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning”.

The policy advice document *Directions for Assessment in New Zealand*² goes further by placing the “assessment capability” of students, teachers and peers at the centre of effective learning. By “assessment capable” the writers mean that students, teachers and others are “able and motivated to access, interpret and use information from quality assessments in ways that affirm or further learning” (p. 6). It is clear that not only does assessment matter, but that its use involves science, art and artistry on the part of students, teachers and others.

The writers in this inaugural issue of *Assessment Matters* have addressed a number of different themes of AfL in a range of contexts, while considering the critical issue of validity or “fit”. Margaret Carr pays attention to AfL in the development of exemplars for use in early years education and explores the potential of the resource, *Kei Tua o te Pae* to enable AfL that “reaches beyond the horizon”. Bronwen Cowie considers teachers’ decision making using AfL based on interactions between students and teachers, and examines the principles and consequences for the beneficial effects that arise from such interactions.

Rosemary Hipkins examines assessment of the key competencies that are at the centre of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. She canvasses the possibility that students and teachers working backwards to create records of learning with respect to key competencies “would move assessment thinking forward, and help us achieve the transformative changes intended by the developers of the key competencies”.

1 The Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning (2009, March). *Position paper on assessment for learning* (p. 2). Unpublished manuscript.

2 Absolum, M., Flockton, L., Hattie, J., Hipkins, R., & Reid, I. (2009). *Directions for assessment in New Zealand: Developing students’ assessment capabilities*. Unpublished paper prepared for the Ministry of Education.

Louise Hayward considers those elements of trust and collaboration in Scottish teachers' professional learning about AfL that are essential if the practices of AfL are to be widely adopted in schools within an educational system. Successful professional learning about AfL is enhanced by a culture of professional inquiry, argue Michael Absolum and Robyn Gibbs as they evaluate the Assess to Learn professional development programme for teachers.

Lyn Shulha and Robert Wilson illustrate through the experiences of two teachers how information about students' achievement and progress from the Ontario province-wide assessment in Canada can provide useful directions for improving teaching and learning within the classroom.

Finally, the matter of validity is examined for defining, assessing and reporting against national standards in literacy and numeracy. The New Zealand Assessment Academy (Alison Gilmore, Terry Crooks, Charles Darr, John Hattie, Jeff Smith and Lisa Smith) argue for principles and practices that support the educationally beneficial effects of such standards-based assessment.

The field of educational assessment as a discipline and a set of practices continues to swell. The issues and challenges are international. Assessment for learning is one such international challenge and aspiration. With this inaugural issue of *Assessment Matters* we invite you to join the discussion, debate and communication about a wide range of matters relating to assessment, and to "push the thinking" further.

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