

EDITORIAL

Mary Hill

In 1977, Michel Foucault described disciplinary power as a “multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location which overlap, repeat, or imitate each other, support each other, or distinguish themselves from one another ... converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method” (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). In the classroom assessment special interest group at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting this year (2013), papers, posters, debates, and addresses seemed to be coalescing around the general method of formative assessment. Underlining a move to see formative assessment as central to teachers’ practice in the United States, Margaret Heritage (2013), using Frederick Erickson’s image, reminded us that, in addition to looking “upstream at what has been learned”, assessment needs to look “downstream at what can be learned”. To do the downstream (formative) work teachers need professional knowledge and skills to support learners in their learning. This is the case because a hallmark of formative assessment is its emphasis on student efficacy. Because it is students who do the learning, they need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. In the process, formative assessment, used with skill, can increase student motivation, autonomy, and metacognition leading to collaboration and academic learning.

Formative assessment has, of course, been a matter of central interest for assessment researchers and policy makers internationally for several decades now. But as authors in this issue of *Assessment Matters* remind us, becoming skilful in the use of formative techniques is a challenging and sometimes lonely endeavour. In many jurisdictions, such as the United States, and at some levels of schooling in particular, formative assessment has been, and often still is, understood and implemented as interim tests. In secondary schools within New Zealand “formative assessments” are seen as practices, tests, or activities to judge achievement towards meeting standards or to diagnose gaps so that students might be readied for final tests and examinations. Authors in this issue of *Assessment Matters*

challenge these views and uses of the term “formative”. They investigate ways in which teachers and school leaders work to improve their use of assessment to support and include learners in the learning process. In particular, the articles in this issue address how quality evidence is collected and used in the service of learning while also acknowledging how challenging this can be.

Three articles delve into particular approaches to formative assessment. Two draw from the New Zealand context. Scott Lee explores the notion of a thinking conversation as a formative device that can assist teachers to discover what learners know, understand, and can do without focusing on predetermined aspects of performance. His focus is the realm of key competencies. Lee provides examples to show how students’ views can be elicited, and how these can then be inductively and deductively analysed to provide the next steps in learning and teaching. Keeping with the theme of eliciting information from students so that teachers, and students themselves, might recognise and respond to support learning during teaching, Peter Rawlins makes an argument for using the ESRU (eliciting, student response, recognising, and using) framework (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006). He concludes that the ESRU framework has the potential to more fully describe the intent and outcome of questioning sequences in the mathematics classroom to better understand the complex dimensions of informal formative assessment.

The third article exploring ways to elicit and use information students provide about their learning is set in the context of the United States. Deborah Bohn and Peggy Johnson describe how first-grade teachers in California linked the data they had about their students’ literacy learning to their teaching decisions for those students. This article provides a rich description to illustrate how leadership, professional development, useable data systems, and collaboration interacted to influence teachers’ data use. Their findings highlight collaboration as a critical factor in advancing these teachers’ use of data to inform their literacy instruction.

Staying in the United States, Anastasiya Lipnevich, Leigh McCallen, and Jeff Smith report on a study that investigated school leaders’ perceptions of what constitutes effective feedback. As studies in New Zealand have demonstrated, school leaders are the controllers of practice and the

conductors for change (Hill, 2011). Using Hattie and Timperley’s model of feedback, these authors found that school leaders rated task feedback most effective for teaching writing. These authors raise the question, “most effective at what?” They discuss the tendency of educators to address the immediate concerns of the task at hand and raise the important role that school leaders can play in refocusing teachers on what this information from their students might suggest for future teaching and learning—Heritage’s downstream focus.

Also with a focus at the school level, Martin Thrupp and Ann Easter draw us back to the New Zealand context and the implementation of national standards. National standards have recently been introduced in New Zealand in reading, writing and mathematics to “provide signposts that give teachers, children, parents, (and) families ... a clear idea of where children are at in their learning and what they have to do next” (Ministry of Education, 2010). Unlike other countries, New Zealand’s standards for primary schooling rely on teacher judgments, known as overall teacher judgments (OTJs), against descriptive levels of achievement. This approach to standards is designed to avoid the negative effects of whole cohort testing experienced elsewhere, but brings with it new challenges and issues. Through brief accounts of each of six schools, Thrupp and Easter illustrate how crucial it is to take into account the individual school contexts to understand implementation.

Finally, again on the theme of formative assessment, Magnus Levinsson, Henrik Hallström, and Silwa Claesson explore the issues and challenges for secondary teachers who strive to involve learners in their own assessment. Set in the Swedish policy context where secondary teachers are strongly encouraged to use more formative approaches, Levinsson et al. focus on the experiences of a physics teacher who participated in a local development project in an upper secondary school. This richly descriptive article paints a picture of personal development through learning to change professional practice. These lived-through dimensions deepen our understanding of the barriers that many teachers face and carry implications for the support they need.

In an exciting development, this issue of *Assessment Matters* includes a new section featuring reviews of assessment books. Two books are

reviewed in this issue. First, Alex Gunn reviews *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*, by Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee. Published in 2012 by Sage, this book also continues the formative emphasis of this issue. The book illustrates how narrative assessment practices in general, and learning stories in particular, address a major claim of Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education: that participation in high-quality early childhood education should lead to children viewing themselves as competent and confident learners. The review was instrumental in my purchasing a copy of this book!

Lorna Gillespie and Bronwen Cowie review the second book, *Assessment in Physical Education: A Sociocultural Perspective*. In this review they explore the ways in which authors Peter Hay and Dawn Penney portray assessment as a highly complex and dynamic process that is subject to equally complex and dynamic influences. While at first glance the title might appeal only to physical education teachers, the reviewers whet the readers' appetite for a book that is much broader than a curriculum text. In their own words, this book "provides rich insights on which researcher and practitioner communities might base further research and conduct a productive discussion into the complexities of assessment and the various influences on, and of, our own and others' assessment practices".

Finally, I encourage you to share this journal with others interested in the "downstream effects of assessment" through both the hard copy and online versions. We are all, then, part of the processes that converge to strengthen education through the general method we know as formative assessment.

Mary Hill
General Editor

References

- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Heritage, M. (2013, April). *Some thoughts about prospects for formative assessment*. Address to the Classroom Assessment Special Interest Group, AERA Annual Meeting, San Francisco.

- Hill, M. F. (2011). Getting traction: Enablers and barriers to implementing assessment for learning in secondary schools. *Assessment in Education*, 18(4), 347–364. doi:10.1080/0969594X.2011.600247
- Ministry of Education. (2010). National Standards. Retrieved from: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Parents/YourChild/ProgressAndAchievement/NationalStandards.aspx>
- Ruiz-Primo, M., & Furtak, E. (2006). Informal formative assessment and scientific inquiry: Exploring teachers' practices and student learning. *Educational Assessment*, 11(3&4), 205–235.