Editorial

Welcome to the 2017 issue of *Assessment Matters*. This issue contains a variety of international assessment articles regarding the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors. Reading these articles, it is clear that teachers, wherever they are and whatever their subject focus or education level, require deep understanding and an extensive skill set in educational assessment. As the topics in this issue suggest, teachers must know about grading theory and practice, assessing students for whom the language of assessment may not be their first language, assessment policies, feedback and, in this era, computer-assisted assessment. They also need data literacy in order to understand and use the increasingly large amounts of information which assessment management and learning systems can produce. It is probable that never before in history have we had such a complex assessment landscape. Internationally, curriculum and assessment policy reforms are adding new purposes to the mix, technology is producing new assessment tools, and international organisations are raising educational outcome competitiveness. For me this raises the question of assessment preparation and professional learning for teachers at every level. New questions arise, such as: How do teachers learn about, and to use, assessment in all its variations competently and confidently? Who is responsible for ensuring teachers have the necessary assessment literacy and capability? And how best might this professional learning be advanced?

One source of professional education, of course, is published materials such as this journal that advance the field. The articles in this journal, including the 2014 special issues on teacher preparation for assessment, and others in the field, play an important role here, but so do edited international collections with chapters written by leading experts in the field. Recently at least two such publications have added to our thinking about educational assessment and are worth drawing attention to here. *The Sage Handbook of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment* (Wyse, Hayward, & Pandya, 2016) tackles the issues raised above in 11 state of the art chapters in Volume 2 and while very much directed at the compulsory schooling sector, these chapters include both assessment

of learning and the role of assessment as pedagogy. Although there is a chapter reviewing what is known about in-service teacher learning through communities of practice, what is not so clear from this collection is how to prepare teachers for their assessment role. Brown and Harris's edited collection, the *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions of Assessment* (2016) offers an even more extensive 29-chapter text and includes three chapters regarding professional learning in assessment. What these, and other volumes, make clear is that there is still much to know and work to do to equip teachers for their complex assessment roles. Relatively few studies exist that systematically investigate teachers' assessment practices in action in classrooms, and fewer still are about interventions that can assist teachers to develop this expertise.

The articles in this issue of *Assessment Matters* do, however, provide glimpses into classroom assessment across many countries and from a variety of curriculum areas and educational levels. Furthermore, running across the contributions to this issue is a focus on the formative and the first two combine this with a focus on technology. At the large-scale tertiary level, Amanda Harper and Gavin Brown's study investigates the use of an online homework system to support first-year university students' biology learning. The data for this article was sourced from the online system itself, providing an objective dataset about who uses the system and exploring its benefits. In particular, this system is intended to provide feedback to tertiary students and provide direction for them about where to next in their learning. The study demonstrates that tertiary students don't necessarily use online systems, raising questions about their strategic learning intentions as well as the ways in which educators build assessment technology in to their teaching.

Searle, Elrofaie, Kirkpatrick, Sauder, and Brown's article also focuses on the formative assessment effects of technology, but here the focus is through the use of iPads with children in Grades 7–9 in Canada. Although educational technology has often been heralded as having the potential to transform schooling, there is limited evidence about the extent to which this promise has been realised. The issue of iPads to all teachers across one school district of 40 publicly funded schools provided the authors of this article the opportunity to explore their assessment use. Analysing online posts and face-to-face sharing of exemplars about the use of the iPads

for assessment, the authors discovered five main ways that the teachers used the iPads to support formative assessment. The article describes each of these and provides examples of how teachers achieved them. It is an informative account of new ways in which teachers can implement formative assessment practice when the technology is available in support of learning and teaching.

Classroom assessment action is also at the centre of the article from Price, Smith, and Berg. This small study compared the use of personalised written feedback with annotated exemplars to assist students in two high school classes in New Zealand to improve their writing in English classes. Given that personalised feedback drew far more heavily upon teacher time, the question arises as to whether the students' preference for personalised feedback should sway teachers towards this approach over a more efficient one. Price, Smith, and Berg take a multidimensional look at these issues through the use of surveys and focus groups with the students, as well as considering the teacher's perspectives in a written journal. They tackle the issue of whether rubrics and exemplars can be said to be of formative value and, while acknowledging the limitations of a small study, recommend further in-situ classroom experiments to advance the field.

Also in a New Zealand secondary school classroom context, Thorpe, Gilmour, and Walton-Roy flesh out the use of conceptual model of group composing, another form of rubric, which successfully assisted music teachers to involve their students to assess their own work when group composing. As the article explains, engaging meaningfully as a teacher to give feedback and improve learning during the group composing process can be very challenging due to the collaborative and creative processes as well as the length of the composing process. Furthermore, students don't often have the words or concepts required to talk about how their project is progressing or how to improve the creative process. As the authors explain, "Perceiving what people are doing as individuals when working with others is not always possible because creativity and cognition may be distributed over space and time, as well as among and between collaborators" (p.76). In this article, the authors share a model of group composing used with their students both formatively and summatively in the assessment process. The students' voices in this piece exemplify both

the model's utility and their investment in it as they use the language to describe their own progress.

The voices and practices of teachers are central to the fifth article in this issue. Edwards, a programme co-ordinator of the Graduate Diploma for Teaching English as a Second / Other Language in a New Zealand tertiary institute, investigates how teachers make use of a wide range of assessment tasks, activities and observations to make an overall teacher judgement (OTJ) with reference to the various descriptors on the English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP) in order to determine English-language learners' (ELLs) eligibility for Ministry funding of English for Speakers of Other Languages programmes and support. Although a small, exploratory study, this article digs into how these teachers make judgements, use the available tools and develop their classroom assessment expertise through these processes. This is new territory for assessment in the English language assessment field. Up until recently tests have been the main assessment instruments. It is therefore very timely to explore and understand new ways of making assessment judgements.

Two articles investigating assessment in Asian contexts complete the collection in this issue. Shimojima and Arimoto provide a fascinating insight into how seemingly incompatible approaches to teaching for content knowledge and preparing students for the future through 21st Century skills (Zest for life) curriculum can be achieved through the work of teachers and their assessment approaches. Using the metaphor of "three steps forward, two steps back", these authors illuminate ways in which lesson study informs teacher learning and use of assessment for learning within this complex, even conflicting, policy environment.

Moving away from the substantial classroom focus in this issue, Cheng, Yan, Mei, and DeLuca provide a scholarly article analysing grading practices in China. Taking Ministry of Education policy documents, curriculum documents, and discussion papers as their texts for analysis, the authors derive a central theme of *comprehensive quality education* that appears to be driving grading policies in this context. This policy dictates that grading practices should include *both* achievement and non-achievement factors, driving the focus of grading towards holistically assessing the learner rather than the learning alone. Interestingly the policies exhorted

teachers to combine formative and summative assessments without specifying how teachers might achieve this in their grading practices. The discussion papers took up this issue suggesting not one but three different approaches. These approaches, however, indicated a lack of consistency in how formative assessment was understood, leading the authors of this article to highlight issues of misalignment potentially bringing challenges to practitioners and inconsistent incorporation of assessment practices across schools and classrooms

I encourage readers to delve into this collection of articles and learn more about the complexities and classroom conditions of assessment.

Mary Hill
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References

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