

Engagement with learning

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In this edition of Assessment News education advisor Cathie Johnson encourages schools to consider how they can reflect and report on dimensions of engagement and learning that cannot be captured by academic achievement data. She poses a number of questions for readers to ponder and outlines some of the research findings that underpin the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's student engagement survey, *Me and My School*. Cathie has supported a wide range of schools to utilise the tool and now shares some of the teaching and learning journeys that have unfolded across New Zealand as a result.

Reporting beyond academic achievement

The ultimate goal cited in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) is for a child to develop into a “confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong” learner (p. 8), someone who enjoys the process of learning and has the skills to continue to learn independently. When families look at their child's report, how much of that do they see reflected in the words or numbers on the page? The information that parents and whānau receive in student reports across New Zealand can be quite varied in content and it does beg the question: what are the reports to parents and whānau for?

Reporting to Parents and Whānau (Evaluation Associates, 2014) states the purpose of reporting as follows:

Each child's parents and whānau are their first and most important teachers. Building learning focussed relationships and connections between parents,

whānau, and teachers, and supporting all parents, students, and teachers to act in ways that improve learning is therefore vital for each child's ongoing learning and success. (p. 3)

In thinking about the way we report, and the content of the reports, how well are we communicating with families about what improves learning, and, how their child is building the skills and attitudes outlined in NZC's overarching goal? What do parents really want and need to know about how their child's learning is improving?

Take a moment to make a list of what you think really does improve learning for students—are there words like “motivation”, or phrases like “students involved in what and how they learn”, “students knowing themselves as learners” on that list? If your list describes what you think improves learning, how do your reports and your communications with parents reflect your descriptions, and, as a school, how you know and track the development of these skills and understandings in your students?

The important role of student engagement and key competencies

Being interested and involved in school, and feeling connected to it, is important. Research tells us that students who are engaged with their learning and who feel positive about school are more likely to be successful. As an example the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER) longitudinal Competent Children / Competent Learners study (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011) has considered the association between student engagement and a number of educational and social outcomes for students at age 16, and found statistically significant relationships. The report's summary states that:

To improve the proportion of students who gain NCEA Level 2, learning opportunities need to be framed to develop both cognitive and key competencies at the same time and these opportunities need to be provided both in and out of school. (p. 2)

Hipkins (2012) describes three aspects of student engagement.

1. Behavioural, which encompasses the students' actual participation in school and learning. This includes positive conduct, persistence, and involvement in school life.
2. Students' emotional responses to teachers, peers, learning, and school.
3. Cognitive, or the psychological investment students have in their own learning which underpins their willingness to take on learning challenges and self-regulate their learning.

All three aspects are associated with the key competencies in the curriculum, which put considerable emphasis on students having the disposition to learn, to participate, and to relate to others, as well as the inclination to manage themselves and their learning.

Through its research into how to improve students' learning, particularly the Competent Children / Competent Learners study, NZCER has developed an assessment tool that can offer schools a measure of their students' engagement with their learning.

Me and My School survey

The Me and My School survey gathers student voice on how connected students feel with their school and how they see themselves as learners. Using a scale, it describes how much they are willing to get involved, the level of challenge they see in their learning and, importantly, the effort they are willing to give to the process. If you think about the list you made at the beginning of this article, how much does it echo these descriptions that are at the centre of students wanting to learn and engaging with learning?

Me and My School explores the three aspects of student engagement (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive) with a particular focus on the emotional and cognitive aspects, through a series of 36 questions. It also includes six questions about reading habits and four general questions about students' routines. It offers insight into students' out-of-school activities and engagement with social media. There is a junior survey for Years 5–8, and a senior survey for Years 7–10. Both provide reliable measures referenced to national norms.

A feature of the survey is the underlying measurement scale. Students' responses to the survey can be converted to scale scores that locate the students on a described engagement continuum. Once located on the scale, a group measure of engagement can be compared with the national norms, and tracked over time. Written descriptors also allow a scale location to be understood in terms of the most probable responses to the items that are associated with that section of the scale. Me and My School is a self-reported, anonymous survey—it cannot be used to pinpoint particular students who may be turning off school. What it does provide is a rich picture of student attitudes across the school, with analysis by year group, gender and, where subgroups are large enough, by classroom and ethnicity. If you choose to sample the student body in following years, the survey will pick up any changes over time. Reports show how students respond to each item and to the survey overall. By examining survey results across the school or by specific groupings, we find this helps teachers to think more strategically about how to support individual students and how to report to parents and whanau on individual progress.

How schools have used Me and My School

Schools that have used the survey are very positive about how useful it is for gathering student voice about the learning that is happening in their schools. NZCER has been informed of a range of discussions, programmes, and inquiries that have led to teachers thinking differently about teaching and learning. Many of these schools are moving the focus away from being solely content-driven—the “what” of teaching, to think more about “how” teachers teach and what impact that has on students' willingness to learn. For some teachers the survey findings and its support material have been instrumental in their being able to bring the two halves of NZC together and gain traction in helping staff to see how “the key competencies are the key to learning in all learning areas” (NZC, p.12).

Below are some projects that schools have developed as a direct result of using the Me and My School survey.

Focus on gender issues in learning

Survey results showed that girls were reluctant to share their ideas in class, a school developed an observation peer teaching programme. Teachers tracked gender participation in sharing ideas in class discussion and this led them towards new questioning and instructional strategies that built girls' participation.

Focus on the quality of teaching

An important question raised by the survey results for another school was, "why do our students feel that school is a worthwhile place to be, but they're not demonstrating the persistence and effort we'd expect?" This led to an exploration into the types and level of challenge teachers were expecting in the activities they designed. The survey tracked student engagement school-wide as teaching practices changed.

Focus on disengaged students

The question raised by a third school's survey results was: "how can our teachers change what they do in order to increase engagement?" This led to a teacher only day that focused on improving students' willingness to learn by developing their self-awareness as learners. Lots of challenging activities required teachers themselves to improve their own self-awareness around how they learn and how important knowing the kind of support or instruction you need is in being a successful learner.

For reporting, some schools have begun to include the behaviours and attitudes to learning in their strategic goals, and they report progress against them using Me and My School. In other schools:

- students complete self-assessment reflections that focus on their connection and commitment to learning
- teachers are now expected to provide information on students connection and commitment to learning
- three-way conferences now include a focus on how students see themselves as learners.

For this to occur, schools have really had to examine their purpose for reporting and how to best go about it. When

schools apply what they already know about the teaching and learning in their school, they begin to see trends, patterns, and cohorts they recognise in their Me and My School survey results, and it provides a platform toward some truly positive changes in the education they provide.

If you're wondering whether Me and My School is relevant, NZCER provides one-to-one support by helping to define the problem that is the greatest challenge at your school. NZCER also works with individual schools in the collation and analysis of data to help you focus your inquiry in the area or cohort of highest priority.

For more information about Me and My School, please contact: assessmentsservices@nzcer.org.nz or if you would like to discuss how the survey could be used in your school, please contact: educationadviser@nzcer.org.nz.

References

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