

SELF ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A RESPONSE TO STUDENT TEACHER QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT *Self assessment is seen as an important part of pupil assessment in schools. This paper describes how student teachers raised questions about the value, purposes and implementation of self assessment, and were helped to answer them by in-school studies and reference to literature. Five pupil activities are identified: reviewing samples of pupils' work; keeping records; documenting interests, choices and preferences; conferencing and involving pupils, teachers, and parents; and sharing personal responses.*

INTRODUCTION

Students in a Bachelor of Education course on teaching and learning, that I was teaching, asked a series of questions about self assessment and learning. The questions were asked prior to any investigations on their part into self assessment and before any course work had taken place. They subsequently became the basis of a four week module in the course. To assist the student teachers to answer the questions some introductory literature was provided which included references to further readings. Class teaching and discussion followed, and visits were made to two schools where self assessment was a component of classroom programmes. In the first school, an intermediate school, it had been policy for some years to use self assessment as a major part of the assessment programme. In the second, however, two teachers talked with the student teachers about how they were implementing systematic self assessment strategies with their six and seven year old children for the first time.

As a result of the discussion with the teachers new to implementing self assessment strategies in their classrooms and informal discussions with preservice and inservice teachers in general, it was decided to try to answer the questions raised by the student teachers. This might help in future courses. This paper records some of those answers. The information for the answers comes primarily from the results of an exploratory study carried out for the Ministry of Education in 1993-4 (Faire, 1994), literature on the subject, action research with one of the teachers implementing self assessment strategies with six and seven year olds and personal experience.

THE QUESTIONS THE STUDENT TEACHERS ASKED

During the first hour of an optional fifteen hour module of the course on teaching and learning referred to above, the student teachers were asked to write statements about what they already knew of self assessment. Some managed to

record a great deal while others could record very little. Students then talked together about self assessment and listed any questions they had about the topic for further investigation. The questions were collected and produced as a handout for the students to use as a guide for the rest of the course.

There were thirty five questions with, surprisingly, little duplication. They were given to the teachers at the schools to assist them in speaking with the group of student teachers when they met to help answer the questions. To facilitate this process, the teachers at one of the schools grouped the questions into the main categories listed below and used them to present information about self assessment to students, and I have used them to discuss the issues in the rest of this paper.

1. What is self assessment and why use it?
2. What value does self assessment have for children?
3. How can self assessment be implemented?
4. How can self assessment become part of school systems?

What is self assessment and why use it?

The questions within this category included:

- What is self assessment?
- How is self assessment beneficial?
- Is there a difference between self assessment and self evaluation?
- Does self assessment assess failure and progress?
- Does self assessment work?
- Does it work for all curriculum areas?

According to Hancock (1992), the ultimate Latin root of "assessment" is "assidere," meaning "to sit beside". This view of assessment illuminates the meaning of assessment and evaluation of learning and as Rowntree (cited in Hancock, 1992) suggests, this description leads to assessment being thought of

as occurring when one person, in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another, is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and understandings, or abilities and attitudes of that other person. To some extent or other it is an attempt to know that person (p.4).

Self assessment then, occurs when learners assume the roles of both persons described by Rowntree to obtain information (assessment) and interpret it (evaluation). Although each aspect can be separated in theory, in practice self assessment and self evaluation are overlapping elements of the same process.

In recent literature self assessment is the more encompassing term used to describe the process by which learners take responsibility to recognise what it is they are trying to achieve in learning and make a judgement about how well they have done so. Boud (1986) states that

The defining characteristic of self assessment is 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 (p.5).

The ability to evaluate oneself is part of responsible self direction and self management (Biggs and Moore, 1993; Ministry of Education 1993). When learners participate in self evaluation and self reflection, they are using what are known as metacognitive skills (Biggs and Moore, 1993; van Kraayenoord, 1994). Together they form an important aim of schooling and are outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework as the ability to:

set, evaluate, and achieve realistic personal goals;
develop the skills of self appraisal and self-advocacy;
build on their own learning experiences, cultural backgrounds, and preferred learning styles;
take increasing responsibility for their own learning and work;
(Ministry of Education, 1993, p.18-20).

These skills should span the curriculum areas (Ministry of Education, 1993). The guidelines for assessment policy and practice in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1994a) also stress the importance of developing self assessment techniques. They suggest that students should be introduced to self assessment at an early age and given many opportunities to become familiar with a variety of strategies that will allow them to describe their achievements objectively and make statements about those achievements. Learners with these opportunities will also be able to substantiate their achievement statements with evidence in the form of samples of their work, video and audio tapes, photographs, certificates and official records (Ministry of Education, 1994a, p.18).

As well as these official guidelines, there are other reasons why self assessment should be encouraged. Self assessment and evaluation motivate learners (Sutton, 1992; van Kraayenoord, 1994). Increased motivation goes hand in hand with improved learning and performance (Sutton, 1994). Self assessment, therefore, is one important way that assessment can lead to better learning. Because self assessment requires learners to think critically about what they are learning, to identify appropriate standards of performance and apply them in their own work, the feedback to the learner is direct and continuous. It does not have to be mediated by the teacher but is often enhanced by mediation and through discussion with parents and peers.

Another purely practical reason for incorporating self assessment into classroom programmes is that it can reduce the amount of assessment that the teacher is required to perform. Learners from an early age are quite capable of monitoring their own development in a number of curriculum areas, recording their progress through the curriculum in systematic ways and collecting the necessary evidence to support their records. It is sensible that so long as teachers monitor this process, it should not be necessary to duplicate student assessment. The students' records and evidence should stand as the official record of their learning and achievement. Ways of going about this are described later in this paper.

What value does self assessment have for learners?

The questions in this category included:

- Is good self esteem important for self assessment?
- Is it always accurate?
- Is it fair?
- What should not be assessed using self assessment?
- What about children who are too hard or too easy on themselves?
- Is it right for a teacher to reassess children after they have assessed themselves?
- Are there ways in which self assessment is not beneficial?

Self assessment offers several advantages to learners. As well as providing motivation and feedback about what they know and understand, it offers the chance to inform themselves about how they are doing as learners. Van Kraayenoord (1994) describes this as a 'progress report' of their learning (p.46). It also enables learners to discover how they learn best, and how they prefer to learn by investigating which strategies work and which do not, and under what conditions (van Kraayenoord, 1994). Finally, self assessment should be organised to boost the self esteem of learners. It is important that teachers structure self assessment in ways that prevent children from feeling negative about their attempts. To do this, clear shared learning targets, appropriate to each learner need to be established. Progress or success rather than failure can be measured against these goals and criteria. In this way learners can be assisted to focus on their growth and so increase the chance that they will remain optimistic about their personal progress. It is the teacher's role to focus on the student's effort in learning and to demonstrate how using particular strategies will lead to better learning (Sutton, 1992; van Kraayenoord, 1994).

Rather than good self esteem being necessary for self assessment, effective and positive self assessment carried out along the lines explained above leads to good self esteem. In this sense, self assessment is not an easy option for teachers. They have a crucial role to play in ensuring that this form of assessment is a positive experience for learners. To achieve this, self assessment must be as accurate as possible. As suggested above, clear shared learning objectives, geared to each learner are necessary in order for learners to make decisions about their achievement and progress. Global assessments, by their very nature, cannot be accurate and the emphasis in self assessment should be to clearly communicate to each learner the goals of learning and the steps by which each goal can be achieved (Sutton, 1992).

Self assessment also needs to be fair. Herman (1992) warns that performance assessments (including self assessment) are as likely to disadvantage minority students from different racial, cultural and socio-economic groups as are traditional measures. Her synthesis of research points to additional equity problems with performance assessments stemming from the students' opportunity to learn that which is assessed. As she asks:

Have all students had equal occasions to comprehend the complex thinking and problem-solving skills that are the targets of these new assessments? (p. 76).

Rather than asking "Is self assessment fair?" It is suggested that teachers ask themselves, "Am I providing equitable teaching and assessment opportunities for all students?"

A further issue is whether there are times when self assessment is not beneficial. It is difficult to answer this question in a general way. Of course, there will be occasions when any sort of assessment is used in ways that are less than beneficial for students. This might be the case when students are very hard on themselves or don't know the criteria by which to judge their learning. In these cases the teacher's skill would be required to assist students to modify their expectations or become familiar with appropriate criteria. Teachers need to be constantly reflective about such issues to ensure that all teaching strategies are as beneficial as possible in varying circumstances. Perhaps it is more helpful to suggest that self assessment be encouraged in situations where it is most likely to be beneficial to learners, manageable, and where it will improve learning.

How can self assessment be implemented?

The questions in this category included:

- What are the different methods of self assessment?
- Does it involve much teacher time?
- How would a teacher manage the one-to-one aspect of self assessment?
- How could a teacher incorporate feedback to children about self assessment?
- How do you go about introducing it to a class?
- How involved should a teacher be in the self assessment process?
- How do you teach a child to self assess?
- How does the teacher know if the children are taking it seriously?
- What if they are not taking it seriously?
- Who chooses the criteria for self assessment?
- Where do the criteria for self assessment come from?
- How can we get all students to assess honestly?
- How can we use self assessment in tertiary education?
- How can you decide on a grade using self assessment when the criteria are broad?

Due to the large number of questions in this category and the large number of ways to carry out self assessment, this paper will only address this aspect in a general way. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to differentiate between self assessment, self marking and the record keeping involved as a result of these processes.

Boud (1986) makes a useful distinction between identifying standards/criteria to apply to work and making judgements about the extent to which standards have been met. He refers to the latter of these two processes as

self-marking or self-testing as opposed to self assessment which, he argues includes both processes. From personal experience, self-marking appears to be more common in tertiary education, whereas in primary schools, both types can be, and are, utilised (Faire, 1994).

At the primary level there are at least five main student activities that can be used to foster self assessment: reviewing samples of work; understanding progress through record keeping; documenting interests, choices and preferences; conferences with teachers, parents and peers; and sharing personal responses (Faire, 1994; van Kraayenoord, 1994). Each of these activities is commented on below.

1. Reviewing Samples of Work

A popular method of encouraging learners to monitor progress across the curriculum is to get them to keep collections of their work. Known as sample books/folders or portfolios, these collections allow learners to keep longitudinal records of their ideas, drafts, questions and finished products in much the same way as experts in various fields (for example, artists, musicians and photographers) do in order to sample and judge their own life work (Wolf, 1989). Rather than the teacher collecting samples of children's work as evidence to account to others for learning achieved by each individual in their class, student portfolios fulfil the dual purposes of demonstrating learning to others (including their parents, the principal and the Education Review Office) and engaging learners in assessing progress and setting further goals for their own learning.

Using portfolios engages learners in self assessment as they reflect on how well they have achieved the standards and criteria they have set for themselves, gather samples to demonstrate their progress and discuss the inclusion of work samples and artefacts with their teacher, peers, parents or other interested people (van Kraayenoord, 1994). Conferences with the teacher about portfolio items can provide opportunities for the teacher to gather in-depth information about student progress as well as their strengths and needs for future teaching. Recording the decisions made at these conferences could be carried out by the student so that he or she becomes to some extent responsible for the action taken as a result of the discussion (van Kraayenoord, 1994).

Portfolios are becoming popular in several western countries and there is an increasing amount of literature available on this topic. Some pioneering work has been done in the United States using laser disk technology (Campbell, 1992) and implementing portfolio systems of assessment with whole districts (Wolf, 1989; Wolf, LeMahieu and Eresh, 1992). Teachers in New Zealand have been using collections of children's work as part of their assessment and evaluation systems for some years but only a few schools have explored the use of student-driven portfolios as a major component of their school assessment and record system (Faire, 1994).

2. Understanding Progress Through Record Keeping

Students can also be encouraged to keep written records of their achievement and progress which can be housed in their portfolios. Common examples of pupil

records are reading and writing logs, physical education checklists, profiles of learning in mathematics, goal statements, school reports and journals (Faire, 1994; van Kraayenoord, 1994). It seems logical that these records should not be duplicates of the teacher's records, but rather, complement them. Where the student is capable of monitoring and recording ongoing progress, this should become the official record. Much teacher time and energy can be conserved in this way while at the same time it allows direct feedback on progress to the learner. Some examples of student records can be found in the Ministry of Education's guidelines to teachers (1994a, p.18).

3. Documenting Interests, Choices And Preferences

Part of self assessment is knowing about how you prefer to learn, what you prefer to learn from and such factors as the time of day you are at your best for learning and the environment that supports and facilitates that learning. Students in classrooms can be assisted to explore these types of issues through the use of instruments such as rating scales, interest inventories, questionnaires and checklists. These may become part of the learning portfolio for future reference or they may be completely separate.

Examples of this sort of self assessment activity are the reading interest inventories often used by teachers at the start of a school year and the questionnaires about attitudes to reading and writing published in literacy guidelines. Farr and Tone (1994) include some useful blackline originals that can be used in the literacy area even with very young children because the response is indicated with smiley, neutral and sad faces. The same ideas could well be used in a variety of curriculum areas.

As well as alerting the learner to his or her own preferences and choices, these devices can provide information to the teacher about special needs or interests on which to base future teaching. Parents, too, can gain much from the insights recorded by children in these ways.

4. Conferences With Teachers, Parents And Peers

Conferences are discussions with an evaluative and goal setting purpose. They are important strategies to support and encourage student self assessment. In a conference teachers can stimulate learners to ask questions of themselves such as, "What am I good at? What am I learning to do presently? What am I planning to learn next?" They assist students to practise reflection and thinking about their own learning; in other words, to increase their metacognitive awareness (van Kraayenoord, 1994).

An issue associated with teacher-student conferences is the time it takes to conference with all learners on a one-to-one basis. While this is a real concern for teachers, there are ways to make conferencing more manageable. For example, planning times for conferencing when the class is undertaking quiet, individual work or when another teacher or adult is available to assist. Some teachers conference with students before the first class begins, while others see it as part of their teaching role and set aside teaching time during part of a week.

Other types of conferences can also serve some of the purposes of the teacher conference. Group conferences about particular aspects of learning are one option, as are peer conferences where pairs or triads discuss progress or evidence of learning from each other's portfolios and set new goals together. Parents, too, can conference with their children. This can be a formal part of the ongoing classroom programme where parents are invited by their child to the classroom to conference about work completed, future goals and plans and ways in which they can support their child as a learner. The teacher may or may not be involved in the conference, but could be on hand to clarify and explain when necessary.

5. Sharing Personal Responses

As well as conferencing there are a number of activities that encourage students to share their personal responses to their learning and so gain extra feedback to assist them with self assessment. For example, students working in a problem solving programme in mathematics can be encouraged to share their processes and solutions with a group or class. Responses might suggest alternative approaches or positively reinforce the efforts of that learner. In reading and writing the 'Author's Chair' activity (Graves and Hansen, 1982) involves children in sharing their writing or reading with the rest of the class who are encouraged to give positive or helpful feedback and to ask questions to clarify or extend the writer's/reader's message.

Co-operative learning activities also provide opportunities for learners to share personal responses and assess their own ideas against those of others. Because this takes place in an informal way, it is rarely the threatening situation that normative grading can be. In contrast, co-operative learning incorporates group reflection, positive interdependence and individual accountability to support learners to achieve learning goals and model effective assessment strategies (Ministry of Education, 1994b).

How can self assessment become part of school systems?

The questions in this category included:

- Is self assessment common in schools?
- Should every educator use self assessment?
- How does self assessment fit within the official requirements in the education system?
- Is self assessment enough on its own?
- Would the Education Review Office be satisfied with the children's self assessment rather than teachers' assessment?
- How do you establish a balance between self assessment and the assessment of educational institutions?

In terms of their own teaching philosophy, many New Zealand primary school teachers are in favour of self assessment, yet are curiously reluctant to implement it to any great extent (Faire, 1994). This could be due to factors such as a lack of knowledge about how self assessment can be implemented, a lack of confidence

to attempt it, its manageability in classrooms or finding the time to experiment with new assessment techniques when so much effort is needed to implement current assessment procedures. Work in progress in one primary classroom (Hill and Jones, 1995) and the experience of at least one intermediate school, however, demonstrate that it is possible to successfully integrate self assessment into school procedures.

Discussions with the principal at the intermediate school mentioned above support the view that the Education Review Office is satisfied to accept records of children's self assessment as an official part of a school's documentary evidence about the quality of learning in that school. It must be stated, however, that self assessment evidence is not used instead of teachers' assessment evidence. Rather, both are complementary and a balance needs to be established so that one enhances the other. This balance will be different from school to school, and, most probably, from classroom to classroom. The extent to which children at different levels of the system will be able to assume the assessment and evaluation role will differ, as will the confidence and knowledge of teachers. Even within one school, some teachers might feel quite confident about their ability to incorporate both self and teacher assessment into their programmes while others may not. Each school needs to address the incorporation of self assessment within its assessment policy and provide professional development opportunities to support staff to implement self assessment.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to address the questions asked in a preservice teacher education course about self assessment. Although each question was not answered individually, responses were made to each of the four main categories of questions. There may, of course, be many issues and questions remaining.

Implementing self assessment in primary classrooms is not an easy task. It is one that requires confidence, knowledge and commitment on the part of the teacher, a supportive policy and viewpoint from the school's leadership and enthusiasm from the children. If all these conditions exist, however, the rewards for learning can be great. It is my hope that through further teacher education courses at both the preservice and inservice levels, the positive ideals most teachers have for self assessment can and will be implemented in practice.

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