



## Assessment for Accountability, Reporting, and Improving Learning: Have we got the Balance Right?

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper argues that since the introduction of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework, recent assessment practices in New Zealand primary schools have been driven more by accountability requirements and other external factors, with less regard given to assessment practices that promote individual student growth in learning. Many of the assessment issues outlined in the paper relate to the wider social, economic and political framework of education and have had a detrimental effect on assessment practices in classrooms. The paper discusses the implications of this imbalance for teachers, students and schools and outlines future directions for assessment.*

### INTRODUCTION

"In the end teachers just go into automatic mode and go along and tick, tick, tick and at the end of the day, they don't really mean anything anyway..." (Hill, 2000, p.21). These sentiments are currently being echoed in many primary school classrooms in New Zealand. They reflect many educators' growing frustrations with current developments in assessment and the demands being placed on teachers. Teachers often claim they spend so much time assessing students that they have no time to enjoy teaching them. Crooks (1988) noted that classroom assessment "has powerful direct and indirect impacts, which may be positive or negative, and thus deserves very thoughtful planning and implementation" (p.438). According to Wylie (1997) schools rate changes in student assessment practices the highest challenge of all the major reforms, closely followed by related issues such as internal monitoring and evaluation of school/class programmes and reporting student achievement to parents. Recently, assessment has been described as a major influence on curriculum implementation and consequently on learning (Carr *et al.*, 2000). In 1989, somewhat ironically, the Minister of Education claimed, when setting up a working party on 'Assessment for Better Learning', "I am confident that by addressing issues of assessment in this way, we can develop procedures which will make our system more effective, monitor progress, and help the individual learner" (Department of Education, 1989, p.6). This paper will argue that, in practice, the "system" has not become more effective and

...the ways in which a school puts into practice the policy set out in the national curriculum statements. It takes account of local needs, priorities, and resources, and is designed in consultation with the school's community (p.4).

Grundy argues that the limited view of curriculum as something which is 'given' to students needs to be challenged. Curriculum is actively constructed between the players and their milieu. Therefore curriculum, by its very complexity, makes assessment problematic.

Joseph's (2000) conceptions or cultures of curriculum provide us with a useful platform from which to examine assessment in schools. He sees these cultures as overlapping systems. His six cultures are:

1. Training for work and survival. Gaining basic skills, habits and attitudes
2. Acquiring core cultural knowledge, traditions and values
3. Nurturing individual potential, creativity and knowledge of the emotional and spiritual self
4. Developing autonomous, critical thinkers
5. Learning and experiencing the deliberative skills, knowledge, beliefs and values necessary for participating in and sustaining a democratic society
6. Confronting the dominant order by examining and challenging oppressive, social, political and economic structures (*Ibid.*, pp.12-13).

*The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (NZCF) and its assessment practices are, on paper, more closely aligned to the first two cultures through a technocratic, mechanistic outputs-based structure. Currently, assessments are directly related to standards in the form of specified learning outcomes derived from achievement objectives at eight clearly defined levels. In the current climate of accountability, memorisation of the correct answer and mastery of discrete skills has taken precedence over open-ended inquiry and reflective thinking. Evidence of this exists in many primary schools. In my capacity as a facilitator for the MOE 'Assessment for Better Learning' professional development programmes, I have viewed many teachers' planning and assessment folders which contain hundreds of carefully listed specific learning outcomes. These are systematically ticked or dotted when an outcome is achieved or not achieved. When asked about the value of this practice in enhancing student learning, teachers struggle to comment positively! Codd, *et al.* (1995) rightly point to the "dangers of developing a whole generation of learners who are simply good at answering questions on prescribed segments of knowledge" (p.47).

The essential skills in the NZCF infuse a number of Joseph's (2000) cultures but, again, evidence from school visits suggests their assessment

is problematic. A tick in a box on a record card is a senseless activity although not uncommon in our primary schools! I believe the real value of a curriculum lies in cultures three to six as they ultimately help us determine what kind of citizen and society we want to have. Assessing these becomes more problematic because they remain less tangible, less specific and focus on the processes of learning and thinking rather than outcomes and product. Complex educational processes cannot be measured to a high degree of specificity. Codd, *et al.*, (1995) claim "higher levels of thinking...hook the student into more sustained learning" (p.47) and should therefore be given considerable prominence in assessment discourse.

Joseph (2000, p.4) also refers to Cuban's (1993) framework of multiple curricula for curriculum investigation. Cuban claims curricula can be viewed in four categories: the *official* curriculum found in curriculum guides; the *taught* curriculum which is what individual teachers focus on and choose to emphasise (often the choices represent teachers' knowledge, beliefs about how subjects should be taught, assumptions about their students' needs and interests); the *learned* curriculum encompasses all that students actually learn; and the *tested* curriculum. This framework of multiple curricula can be likened to a funnel with the tested or assessed curriculum representing only a part of what is taught, learned or officially documented. As Boomer (1992) states, "a good deal of what is learnt is unexamined and unevaluated because the teacher only tests what is set in the curriculum" (p.9). Thus Grundy, Joseph and Cuban all remind us of the complexity of conceptualising curriculum. Assessment as a major process within curriculum provides teachers with many challenges.

Sadler (2000, p.1) and the MOE (1994) claim assessment can serve three purposes. First, to improve the learning capability; second, for reporting; and third, for accountability or for providing summative information. The MOE's handbook on assessment claims that "the main purpose of school-based assessment is to improve students' learning and the quality of learning programmes" (1994, p.7). Improving learning involves teachers using:

...assessment to identify knowledge and experience which students bring to the learning task, to plan and/or refine teaching and learning programmes, and to meet individual and group needs,...to monitor progress... Assessment can be used to provide feedback to students (*Ibid.*).

Information gained on student achievement and progress is reported to parents or other schools. Accountability, Sadler (2000) claims, is about effectiveness and efficiency of the education or the schooling system. Does the whole system give value for money? Is the level of achievement of the learner population high enough? In principle the three purposes are mutually supportive but in "practice tensions exist among the simultaneous

achievement of these three purposes" (*Ibid.*, p.2). Sadler claims reasons for this include:

Some of the processes that are commonly (and possibly necessarily) used to achieve those purposes are single purpose. That is they are tailored specifically to best suit only one of the purposes. The more a process is aligned (exclusively or predominantly) with one of the purposes, the less attention is paid to simultaneously achieving the other two purposes. If the process that is best for one purpose also turns out to be best for another of the purposes, this is entirely fortuitous. In practice, it never occurs, or almost never (*Ibid.*).

Since the curriculum reforms of the early 1990s, schools have experienced an increasing emphasis on assessment for accountability with less regard given to assessment practices that enhance learning. The next section outlines some of the reasons for this.

### ASSESSMENT FOR ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ASCENDANCY OF MANAGERIAL VALUES

The political, economic and social context (milieu) has been instrumental in shaping recent education, curriculum and assessment reforms in New Zealand primary schools. Apple (1996) quite rightly argues that:

Curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge...it is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge...it is produced out of cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions and compromises that organise and disorganise people (p.22).

Legislation in the form of the State Sector Act, 1987, Public Finance Act 1989 and the Employment Contract Act, 1991 laid the foundation for a managerialist approach to education (Sullivan, 1999). Managerialism represented a strong move away from the ideology of welfarism (Peters, 1995). Boston (1991) summarises a number of its key beliefs which are reflected in our current assessment directions:

- a shift from the use of input controls and bureaucratic procedures and rules to a reliance on quantifiable output measures and performance targets;
- the devolution of management control coupled with the development of new reporting, monitoring and accountability mechanisms (p.9).

Peters and Marshall (1996) remind us that in 1987 the Treasury's thinking was that education could be "analysed in a similar way to any other service as it shares the main characteristics of other commodities traded in the market-place" (p.65). The educational vision was based on New Right ideals influenced by public choice theory (Boston, 1991). A central feature of New Right ideology is the reduction of state intervention and the use of the market as a "superior allocative mechanism for the distribution of scarce public resources" (Peters & Marshall, 1996, p.73). *The Porter Project* (Crocombe, Enright & Porter, 1991), funded by the Trade Development Board and supported by government ministries and agencies, became a major source of stimulation for developing a culture of enterprise and competition in this country. It reported on our failure to broaden and upgrade our competitive advantage in the light of increasing international competition, noting "New Zealand's institutions and policies have retarded the progress of the economy...we have been weak in developing our skill base" (Crocombe *et al.*, 1991, pp.8-9). It also claimed New Zealanders were poorly motivated and lacked the competitive edge. The report questioned the relevance of a curriculum that focused on social issues and provided poor preparation for the competitive world. Readers of *The Porter Project* were left in no doubt that the rhetoric of the report supported the New Right agenda. Lockwood Smith's address to the Post Primary Teachers Conference in May of 1991 reflected the findings of the project. As Minister of Education he argued:

The change [to increased Government involvement in assessment and curriculum matters] is a result of the Government's heightened recognition of education as a significant aspect of national development, its central position in the development of a sound economic strategy (cited in Willis, 1992, p.205).

Smith specifically referred to *The Porter Project* to justify the need for an 'achievement initiative' and standards based assessment. It was not surprising, therefore, that assessment was to dominate the draft *National Curriculum of New Zealand* (Ministry of Education, 1991a). In this document the tensions regarding the dual purposes of assessment are evident. On the one hand the document stated "The emphasis of the assessment will, therefore, be on good diagnostic monitoring which is formative and ongoing, and makes use of a wide range of proven procedures that are already well established in New Zealand schools" (*Ibid.*, p.25). On the other hand, assessment in the form of national monitoring of students' progress was being promoted as a tool to "assist with decisions on the targeting of resources" (*Ibid.*).

What was becoming very obvious was that the educational debates were being led by economists, spearheaded by the Treasury rather than by educationalists (Willis, 1992). As Willis (1992) notes, "The New Zealand

Treasury response makes it clear that the accountability function of assessment may, in some situations, take precedence over the interests of individual learners" (p.211). Educational policy began to emphasise technical notions of quality, excellence, efficiency, consumer choice, effectiveness and better utilization of public resources. This, in turn, was to impact on curriculum with a call for increased accountability for meeting defined outcomes. Codd (in press, p.5), for example, claims the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* is a "curriculum for social control to ensure that centrally formulated social and economic objectives are met."

Decentralisation and devolution of various decision-making powers to the local or institutional level was advocated as a means of improving educational quality. However the government was to retain more centralized control over critical political areas such as curriculum and assessment. Control could be achieved by making schools more accountable for results. In managerial terms, productivity was to be improved as teachers were seen to be "inefficient, overly influential, lacking accountability and working against the best interests of the learners and the national good" (Sullivan, 1999, p.144). On the government's agenda was an improvement in the way schools measured and monitored student performance. Given its \$2.5 billion investment in salaries and schools' operation grants, it is hardly surprising that the government wants information on the achievement of students which will enable it to determine the effectiveness of its investment and the adequacy of its curriculum (Phillips, 1998). Somewhat naively, a complex set of relationships was to be reduced to simple outcomes. Improved accountability through more effective measurement and monitoring was to lead to improved student outcomes. Apple (1996) writing about the American context maintained that such directions were aimed at "the efficient production of better human capital" (p.31)!

It has been argued that prior to 'the reforms' New Zealand teachers had a high degree of autonomy, particularly in relation to curriculum issues and what was assessed. Sullivan (1999) suggested our more liberal education system allowed for a focus on students acquiring and challenging received knowledge and enjoying their learning. Teachers and principals thus regarded themselves as primarily accountable to students not to government agencies. With the introduction of *Tomorrow's Schools* (Department of Education, 1988) came a transition from a loose syllabus for each subject to lengthy documents with sets of achievement objectives at eight levels. As Helsby (1999) argues with regard to the British context, there is a higher degree of central prescription with regard to both curriculum content and curriculum assessment. The regular auditing of schools and performance pay all conspire to constrain and shape teacher practices into a narrow, conforming and predictable set of prescriptions. However there appear to be "few guidelines as to how to operationalise assessment as a tool for school improvement" (Hill, 2000, p.21).

In the early 1990s, new assessment policies and programmes were implemented to ensure that student learning was more effectively monitored, recorded and reported (Phillips, 2000). The assessment section of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) clearly stated the "assessment of individual's student progress is essentially diagnostic" (p. 24). The National Administration Guidelines (1993) outlined the new assessment requirements. Hill (1999) believes the National Administration Guidelines blurred the boundary between assessment for accountability and assessment for better learning. She (*Ibid.*, p.179) notes: "rather than strategies that might lead to improved learning such as continuous assessment during teaching as part of the teaching process, self assessment by students and formative feedback to motivate learning, words such as 'achievement', 'monitoring progress', 'national achievement objective' and 'student records and reporting' entered into the discourse." They were supposed to make clearer the government's expectations of schools in implementing the curriculum and monitoring student achievement. The inference is that through accountability, learning and the quality of learning programmes is to be improved. Education and learning had changed its focus from inputs and process to outcomes and product; that is, what is learnt rather than what is taught.

Hill (1999, p.21) reflects on the impact of the ensuing assessment 'frenzy'. Many primary schools developed checking systems of "dot, slash, cross" against large numbers of specific learning outcomes which were not geared to guide students in how to improve their learning, nor could they diagnose individual strengths and learning needs. However, with these systems in place, schools felt they were in a better position to show ERO how well the children had absorbed the required learning! School policies and procedures were redrafted with comprehensive, often unmanageable, assessment programmes designed to assess every aspect of the school curriculum. In Hill's (*Ibid.*) research a teacher noted:

I find that a lot of the things that are being assessed at the moment are the things that are easily assessed and therefore they are sort of almost driving what's being taught because that's what ERO seems to be wanting. They want to be able to see things that are easily assessed and then they can put all the things together and say "well there's so many kids here that are not meeting expectations and what have you done about it?" but you do have to be careful that you don't end up just teaching to those things because they are easily assessed and therefore you teach them.

This teacher echoes Eisner's (1979) arguments about understanding, insight, appreciation and interests being replaced by more directly observable behavioural objectives. He states "when objectives are stated behaviourally, it is possible to have specific empirical referents to observe;

thus one is in the position to know without ambiguity whether the behavioural objective has been reached" (p.93).

The MOE (1995) tried to address the assessment imbalance created by its own policies, by claiming that they were concerned that assessment did not dominate the teaching and learning programme. Rather, it should be an integral part of teaching and learning: "Schools should aim to develop assessment procedures which are manageable for teachers, non intrusive for students, and focused on promoting learning" (1995, p.1). Even though this was the message given to schools, the reality of implementing their suggestions was much more complex. Codd (in progress, p.7) points out:

...this dominant culture is more concerned with what can be recorded, documented and reported about teaching and learning than it is with the educative process itself. Knowledge, experience, understanding and especially imagination are recognised only if they can be reduced to something observable, or to some performance outcome that can be specified in advance of the educational moment.

Assessment directions highlighted the "intensification of the tension in schools between managerial values and educational values" (Adams, 2001, p.291). There is now a large body of evidence which argues and demonstrates that managerial values are displacing educational values. Helsby, (1999, p.32) commenting from an internal perspective claims the debate mirrors:

...the tensions within the dominant New Right coalition between neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies of the 'new work order.' Interestingly no evidence existed to show that this approach improved the main function of schools-improving teaching and learning.

The rise of managerialism has been accompanied by a desire to increase the demands for review, audit and monitoring of education under the guise of quality assurance (Hazeldine, 1998). ERO became a manifestation of this ideology and had a powerful influence on the dominance of assessment for accountability. Thrupp and Smith (1999, p.189) noted that the ERO reviews from 1997 provided a:

...fascinating example of the fundamental tensions between what Codd (1994) has called "technocratic-reductionist" and "professional-contextualist" views of New Zealand education.

The surveillance of schools by ERO and the fact that the reviews are published, has resulted in assessment becoming a high stakes activity. If schools were now to be 'objectively' compared in a public forum, they would be obliged to collect information to show their students were reaching the desired levels of achievement through test scores and comprehensive records of achievement. Codd (1996) described ERO as being "a dominant technocratic force in the New Zealand education system" (p.10). In a letter to the MOE (Education Review Office, 1994) ERO stated "the role of the ERO sits outside any specific guidance that is provided to a school on assessment policies and practices. In fulfilling its role, the office does not seek any information that is not reasonably part of the information base that a well performing school would seek to have for its own purposes." Renwick and Gray (1995) reported on ERO's excessive and inappropriate attention to record keeping which led many schools to create huge checklists. Later, ERO (1999, p.7) was itself to criticise these "quasi-mastery" assessment practices but provided little guidance as to how schools could meet accountability requirements. Meanwhile, teachers reported that time spent on assessing had increased with less time to cover what was fast becoming an overcrowded curriculum. This meant teachers had less time to spend with individual children, and less time for lesson planning and preparation (Renwick & Gray, 1995).

ERO consistently maintained that schools had very little dependable information about the achievements of students during their first ten years of schooling. They were also concerned at the lack of nationally referenced tools for assessing student progress and achievement and actively supported the establishment of national testing. *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools (The Green Paper)* (Ministry of Education, 1998) was designed to promote debate on this subject. It (Ministry of Education, 1998 cited in Phillips, 2000) stated that schools needed better information on:

- national expectations of student achievement in relation to achievement objectives, which teachers could use to benchmark or check their own professional judgements;
- how well their students were achieving compared with aggregated data for groups of similar students nation wide, which schools could use to evaluate the effectiveness of their programmes for specific groups of students within their schools;
- the achievement trends of subgroups of students that Government could use to monitor the effectiveness of policies (p. 147).

Many groups, including the teacher unions responded to the *Green Paper* stating that its emphasis was at variance with the philosophy and approach of *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*. It was argued that this pressure for what would amount to national testing, had the potential to

distort classroom curriculum and pedagogy and would divert valuable teaching time away from its proper focus on learning (Carr *et al.*, 2000). The proposed high stakes assessment would consequently drive the system in narrow, negative ways and would become a substitute for other more valuable forms of assessment that focus on the promotion of better learning. Teachers, of course, would teach to the test. Equally, Hopkins (1988) has argued that national testing disempowers teachers by reducing their involvement in the assessment process.

The ERO (2001a) recently sent a circular to schools outlining possible changes to accountability reviews. These include a focus on educational improvement; factors that make a difference to educational outcomes for students; an "assess and assist" model to review schools and linking more closely to the school's own processes of self review. ERO (2001b) states the new approach to reviews will focus on student achievement and build on the schools' existing processes of self-review. The framework suggests the term "assess and assist" accurately reflects:

...the balance between ERO's twin purposes of accountability and improvement...It intends to carry out reviews that are focussed on schools' needs and concerns...According to ERO's view, "assess and assist" is part of the role of an external evaluator (p.2).

ERO will now be involved in developing recommendations and formulating action plans. Their compliance functions will remain. It will be interesting to see how these directions will impact on classroom assessment practices in the future. I believe the future for ERO must lie in a more realistic and genuinely educative approach to supporting the diverse cultures and needs of schools.

Nevertheless, tension between the two purposes of assessment will undoubtedly increase. The MOE is increasing its control on assessment through the new Education Amendment Bill No.2 (2000) which is advocating changes to school reporting requirements in an attempt to raise standards in schools (Mallard, 2001). School charters must have explicit directions, objectives, priorities and targets relating to student achievement. The charter will then become the basis of annual reporting by school boards to the MOE. Reporting will be 'by exception' which means information is required only when the outcomes differ significantly from what is planned. This raises some interesting issues about what schools will 'plan'!

The desire for more rigorous assessment information is fuelled by the results of international studies. Results from our participation in TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) compared achievement levels of students from 41 countries at ages 9 and 13 years and the final year at school (ERO, 2000). New Zealand students were achieving below the international average in mathematics international and

a little above the average in science, despite much more positive results in literacy studies. The report comments that this "highlights the need to address issues relating to mathematics and science education in New Zealand schools, if major goals for the future were to be met" (ERO, 2000, p.7). Carr *et al.*, (2000) express concern about the quality and usefulness of data from large scale summative assessments in the development of national assessment policy. Pressure groups such as the Education Forum (Irwin, 1994), continue to use these studies as a platform for advocating a more rigorous assessment process which would equate to more assessment for accountability.

Assessment for accountability has supported the technician's view of knowledge as a static quality rather than a dynamic entity. Barnett (1994 cited in Codd, 1997, p.133) observes that knowledge is now viewed as a commodity "picked up by those who pass through in acquiring the latest technical competencies and analytical capacities" whereas in the past it was viewed as insight, appreciation and understanding. We need to acknowledge that assessment for accountability does play an important role in a school's assessment structure. It provides valuable information for self review and can provide information on the quality of teaching and learning programmes.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND SCHOOLS

How has the intensification of assessment for accountability affected schools, students, teachers and their work in classrooms? Hazeldine (1998) points out the irony of ERO's focus, for example, by claiming:

...monitoring directly diverts resources from productive activities and, more insidiously, it fosters the sort of behaviour that it is supposed to prevent. People who are systematically not trusted will eventually become untrustworthy (p.126).

There is growing evidence that moves to measure the effectiveness of schools and report achievement against the achievement objectives have contributed to teachers' feelings of confusion, frustration, disempowerment, untrustworthiness, and lack of confidence and control in assessment (Hill, 1996). Black (1998) claims formative and summative discourses compete, with teachers experiencing tensions between their formative roles of focussing on student needs and a summative role of working within school and MOE guidelines; in these circumstances, "personal concern for the best interests of their pupils might have to take second place" (p.120). An underlying issue in this debate is that of professional autonomy. Indeed as Codd (1999, p.45) has argued:

In pursuit of greater accountability, government policies have introduced systems of managerial surveillance and control that have fostered within educational institutions a culture in which trust is no longer taken to be the foundation of professional ethics.

Teaching is one of the most autonomous professions. Much of what teachers do in their classrooms remains unexamined, unchallenged and apart from a degree of co-operative planning and guidance from curriculum documents, school policies and procedures, teachers act independently in the domain of their classrooms. While the curriculum is broadly defined through the achievement objectives set out in the individual statements which comprise *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) their specific interpretation is largely left up to schools and teachers. However, assessment directions have seriously challenged this historical autonomy through the specific demands of the NAGS. When their autonomy is challenged teachers feel a loss of control. Influence over assessment of the curriculum is as crucial to the notion of teacher professionalism as curriculum is central to teachers' work.

In my view, the State is making a determined effort to de-professionalise teachers by increasing its control over schools, teachers' work and assessment of curriculum. Teacher assessment is seen as too variable with students needing to be protected from weak teachers. The Education Amendment Bill (2000) will enable the MOE to substantially increase its control over teachers through mandatory reporting of student achievement (by exception) and the establishment of the Education Council. It seems the MOE's agenda is to teacher-proof the curriculum! Adams (2001) argues that with a strong emphasis on specific and strictly monitored learning outcomes, the expert professional is transformed into "skilled technician who does not need to acquire any detailed subject and curriculum knowledge" (p.98). Dale (1990) claims assessment directions have "de-skilled" teachers. Likewise, Grundy (1987) points out that as teachers become de-skilled pedagogically, they become re-skilled as educational managers. Teachers are now claiming they are working within an assessment-led curriculum with assessment systems "determining the shape of the school curriculum and the nature of teachers' work" (McCulloch *et al.*, 2000 p.74). Within this framework students are seen as passive; to be controlled, directed, moulded and evaluated rather than as people with whom the learning process should be a co-operative, reciprocal, equal and dynamic interchange. Interestingly, McCulloch, *et al.* (2000) argue that after years of reform, in the United Kingdom, teachers feel they have regained some professionalism through the experience of "doing reform". They claim, "Many teachers have learnt to cope with government mandates and this experience may have strengthened their confidence and enhanced their skills" (*Ibid.*, p.118). However, in this country the state has largely excluded the education sector from policy

development therefore teachers feel little sense of ownership of recent assessment directions (Timperley *et al.*, 1999). Wylie (1999, p.136) notes that:

The government agencies have been advocating national assessment... which runs counter to the prime use of assessment for teachers which is for diagnosis, for immediate use in the teaching activity itself and to aid learning.

Within schools, policies and systems exert considerable influence on teachers to comply with assessment for accountability requirements. Combleth (1990) discusses personal, bureaucratic and technical controls as ways for schools to influence the curriculum-making processes, impeding or facilitating change. With reference to assessment, personal control is maintained through regular monitoring in the teacher appraisal process and through the professional standards. Bureaucratic control is maintained through assessment and evaluation policies and evaluations of units of work. Technical control is embedded in the physical organization or the structure of the labour process. Many primary schools have comprehensive assessment timetables which include schedules for standardised tests, entries into portfolios and information into computer software programmes. Non-compliance becomes more difficult within these tight structures. In relation to these processes Codd (1996, p.14) provides some valuable, cautionary advice for the MOE in the future:

Contractual compliance may ensure that minimal levels of performance are maintained and managerial competence can improve efficiency, but educational excellence derives from personal initiative and professional autonomy.

The dominance of assessment for accountability can have negative effects on student learning. High stakes testing and monitoring restricts pedagogy; both in the teaching activities and the content taught. Narrow testing can have detrimental effects on teaching because learning then follows testing in focusing on aspects that are easy to test, thereby lowering the cognitive level of classroom work. These trends can de-motivate many students, impacting on their confidence and ability to learn whilst rewarding students who work in narrowly constrained ways (Crooks, 2001). As Lawton (1996) observes, "Education is not an assembly line process of mechanically increasing inputs and raising productivity" (p.107)!

Conversely there is evidence that formative assessment has "the potential for significant effects on student learning and outcomes" (Carr *et al.*, 2000, p.81). Hill (2000) notes that some teachers have clearly managed the balance between accountability demands and the need to inform learning through assessment. From her research, she noted that those who



used an "integrated systematic approach" (p.23) appeared to be able to cope more effectively. Eisner (1993, cited in Willis, 1994, p.171) reminds us that it is improvements in the quality of teaching that are more likely to raise educational standards than "mandating assessment practices or urging tougher tests" (p.224). The next section of the paper explores the concept of assessment practices used to enhance learning or formative assessment. It focuses specifically on implications for teachers, classrooms and schools.

## ASSESSMENT TO ENHANCE LEARNING

Black (2001, p.74) maintains that the emergence of formative assessment:

...has been slow and tortured ... in part because its vision has been clouded repeatedly by the interference of summative testing, in part because it locates the functioning of assessment more closely within the complexities of pedagogy.

Promoting children's learning must be a principal aim of schools. It should become their core business. From my observations in many schools I often wonder whether promoting the school, attracting foreign-fee paying students and fund-raising activities have become a higher priority! Our emphasis on assessment for accountability must shift to focus more on assessment practices that enhance learning. Marks or grades alone produce minimal learning gains. Indeed there is some evidence that students gain the most learning value from assessment when feedback is provided without marks or grades (Crooks, 2001). The MOE (1993 cited in Carr *et al.*, 2000, p.63) defines formative assessment as:

...a range of formal and informal assessment procedures (for example, the monitoring of children's writing development, anecdotal records and observations) undertaken by teachers in classrooms as an integral part of the teaching and learning process in order to modify and enhance learning and understanding.

Quality formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998b) maintain, is "not well understood by teachers and is weak in practice" (p.11). They claim the central place of formative assessment must be re-established as it has the potential for significant positive effects on student learning and social outcomes (Black and Wiliam, 1998a; Carr *et al.*, 2000; Black, 2001). This was confirmed by Peddie (2000) in his analysis of the MOE *Assessment for Better Learning* teacher professional development programmes from 1995 to 1998. Recommendations for the 2001 contract stated that attention must be given to the following areas: clarification of the nature of formative and

summative assessment and an understanding of, and practice in, giving informational feedback to students.

Interestingly, the word 'assess' comes from the Latin verb 'assidere' meaning to 'sit' with. In assessment one is supposed to 'sit' with the learner inferring it is something we do *with* and *for* students and not something we do *to* students (Green, 1998). Black and Wiliam (1998b) also argue that improving learning through assessment depends on the provision of descriptive feedback, based on learning outcomes. Indeed Hattie (2001) suggests:

The most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be dollops of feedback providing information how and why the child understands and what directions the students must take to improve (p.4).

Sadly Hattie (*Ibid.*) claims, "the incidence of feedback in a typical classroom, per day, is very low, usually seconds per day." Quality feedback relies on teachers understanding how students learn and having a sound understanding of the conceptual and procedural development in each subject area. My experience in schools suggests this has been problematic for teachers, especially in the field of mathematics, where many teachers have encountered difficulties in their own learning. Teachers should also help students to "close the gap" by giving appropriate prompts or strategies to enable students to make improvements and then give them time to carry them out (Harlen, 1998). Students need to be coached in how to interpret the feedback.

Hattie's (2001) recipe for success is a combination of goal setting, feedback and associated learning opportunities. Feedback needs to be well-timed so that learning is optimised. Students need to be actively involved in their own learning. Students should know what they are trying to learn, understand or improve. Students need to be included in the debate about their learning because it is *their* learning. Given certain learning outcomes, students could, for example, negotiate a contract with the teacher on the assessment process. Crooks (2001) also acknowledges the profound influence assessment has on motivation and self-esteem of students, both of which are crucial influences on learning. It is important, therefore, to anticipate and try to optimise the motivational effects of feedback on assessment. He also suggests the need for students to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve. Self-assessment is a vital component in learning. Feedback on assessment cannot be effective unless students accept that their work can be improved.

With seven new curriculum documents to assimilate in almost as many years, the task has been enormous for primary school teachers. Hill (2000) outlines three useful suggestions for schools in the future. First, teachers need to be confident about assessment by developing their 'assessment



literacy', so they can make informed decisions about their classroom practice. Second, they need to prioritise formative strategies over summative ones and explore the use of data collected for formative purposes being used for summative purposes and vice versa. Third, schools' policies and procedures should focus on assessment for improvement rather than assessment for accountability. Harlen (1998) also suggests it may be possible for teachers to use "evidence gathered for a formative purpose for summarising achievement providing that the differences are understood and that a clear distinction is made between using evidence and using assessment outcomes" (p.12). McGee (1997) claims the strength of the New Zealand primary curriculum is under threat if assessment reduces itself:

...to a complete diet of separate subjects measuring and recording...the benchmark of effectiveness should be: will the recording contribute to judgements and decisions that will improve the curriculum experiences and achievement of students? (p.195).

In short, teachers need to develop an appreciation of the different forms of assessment and the ideological and theoretical assumptions underpinning assessment models (Blackmore, 1988, cited in Willis, 1994, p.166).

## CONCLUSION

There is a complex interaction between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, which through the intervening role of the teacher comes to affect student learning and social outcomes. Assessment alone does not lead to improved learning for students. The issues outlined in this paper are greater and more complex than just those of assessment. They are about curriculum, teaching and learning within a wider social and political framework. They are about neo-liberal reforms that have emphasised managerial values while teachers struggle to hold dear traditional educational values. They are essentially about competing visions of the nature and role of education and the nature of the society for which it prepares our youth.

Thus assessment remains an intensely political and social activity in schools. The tensions between assessment for accountability and assessment to enhance learning will only increase given the government's agenda of increasing intervention into its nature and role. Furthermore, it seems likely that assessment for accountability will continue to remain an acknowledged part of the whole assessment picture in New Zealand primary schools.

Joseph (2000) highlighted a useful framework for conceptualising both the narrower and broader aspects of curriculum. Current MOE policy suggests that our assessment framework fits within a narrow understanding

of curriculum and that in the foreseeable future this will not change. A focus on standards and accountability, which gives less regard to the processes of assessment that enhance learning, will not provide the directions that teachers need in their quest to improve their professional practice. Indeed, higher stakes monitoring and testing strongly affects pedagogy. (Primary schools can be grateful that external testing is not yet an issue to the same extent as at the upper secondary level). Codd (1997, p. 143) reminds us that we have:

...an exaggerated faith in the measurement of performance...[and that] in this narrow, technocratic conception of education outcomes, there is little recognition given to the fundamental question that should guide the whole educational enterprise: what kind of human beings do we want our students to become?

This remains a key question, which few appear keen to think about, let alone answer! If we wish to live in a society that values democracy, then one place to start is with democratic processes, practices and values in our classrooms and schools. Assessment for learning must become a dominant part of this process. Teachers will need considerable professional development in this area in the future but we do know that there is a positive relationship between increased formative assessment and improved learning outcomes (Carr *et al.*, 2000). Boomer (1999) provides us with a salient reminder of our challenge ahead.

Significantly, the schooling systems share a challenge similar to that facing business and industry: the need to eschew Taylorist fragmentation and hierarchical ordering in favour of more democratic, participatory, and qualitatively enlivened teamwork. This will require society to reassess what it wants its schools to be, for without concerted demand for such change, schools will continue to serve as they have in the past (pp.142-143).

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