

Enacting Assessment for Learning: The Beliefs Practice Nexus



Source of Research: Dixon, H., Hawe, E., & Parr, J. (2011). *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18(4), 365-379.

What is this research about?

This research draws attention to teachers' beliefs and their incongruence with teaching practice and highlights the "powerful role that beliefs play in the enactment of specific assessment *for* learning practices" (p. 366).

Stemming from the need to promote self-regulatory behaviour in students, this study was based on an initiative aimed to integrate assessment *for* learning in classrooms in New Zealand. Assessment *for* learning had the following features:

- ♦ Explicitly sharing learning goals and success criteria so that they could be used as a point of reference for feedback.
- ♦ Encouraging students to make judgments about the quality of work, based on multiple criteria, during its actual production.
- ♦ Enabling students to compare their actual level of achievement with an expected standard.
- ♦ Prolonging engagement in developing students' evaluative knowledge and expertise through the appraisal of others' work.
- ♦ Increasing students' ability to self-monitor as an important component of the feedback process.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted a qualitative case study in two phases. In the first phase teachers were interviewed about their beliefs regarding assessment *for* learning and the role of feedback in the enhancement of learning. In addition, learning goals and success criteria were collected. The teachers selected for phase two were teachers whose "self-reported understandings and practice resonated with what has been identified within the literature" (p. 368) as effective feedback practice. The researchers noted that the "primary purpose of phase two was to investigate selected teachers' feedback practice and to probe teachers' intentions, pedagogical decisions and beliefs" (p. 368). In the second phase teachers' assessment practices were observed during genre-based written language units.

What you need to know...

Findings support the notion that teachers' beliefs are influential in regard to their interpretation, uptake and enactment of assessment reform initiatives. Teachers whose beliefs were aligned with philosophies underlying assessment *for* learning had a greater chance of enacting practices in ways intended than those teachers whose beliefs were incompatible. The researchers suggested that "given that beliefs are often private, tacit, unarticulated and deeply entrenched" (p. 377) time must be spent during professional learning opportunities to raise "teachers' awareness of their beliefs and how these beliefs influence their practice" (p. 377).

What did the researchers find?

There were "inconsistencies between teachers espoused beliefs and intentions and their observed classroom practices" (p. 375). "Differences were noted in regard to the nature of judgments teachers asked students to make, the opportunities afforded to students to 'close the gap', the degree of student involvement in evaluative and productive activities, and the amount of control exerted by the teacher" (p. 374).

For example, one teacher (with student input) had established a list of success criteria that outlined the component parts of a narrative.

"Absent from these criteria was any specification of a standard required for successful completion of the narrative. So while on numerous occasions students were told to "keep checking your success criteria to make sure that all these things are included in your plan", the success criteria functioned as a checklist whereby students 'ticked off' the component parts of the narrative" (p. 371).

Observations revealed that this teacher's judgments were "at odds with the judgments students made" (p. 371) because the teacher "had a set of tacit expectations that were unknown to the students. For her, the inclusion of a component part of the narrative was in itself insufficient – for example, she wanted more than a setting – she wanted a description using good language" (p. 371).

In another example, the teacher's feedback took the form of a monologue as she made "a productive decision about what needed to be done to bring the work closer to the desired performance" (p. 372) as opposed to opening up the discussion so that the students determined how to close the gap.