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Assessment is for teaching

Professor Patrick Griffin and Associate Professor Esther Care of the Assessment Research Centre, University of Melbourne, outline key elements supporting the Centre's successful Assessment and Learning Partnerships program, which is improving literacy outcomes for students in Victorian state and Catholic schools.

It is common to hear assessment described as *for learning*, *of learning* or as *learning*. Our stance is that assessment is *for teaching*. This view underpins the Assessment Research Centre's Assessment and Learning Partnerships program (ALP), which has had demonstrated success in raising levels of student literacy achievement (Griffin et al 2009) and is now implemented in approximately 200 schools across Victoria.

If assessment information is used appropriately, students will learn, teachers will be able to monitor learning and students will have the opportunity to engage with relevant learning opportunities. To reach this point several key conditions must be in place.

Standards referenced frameworks

There is no best way to assess learning. Perhaps the most powerful approach is the continuous observation of student activities, and interpretation within the relevant frame of reference. Our

view is that the framework must be criterion referenced so that the growth and development of the student can be monitored through successive levels of increasing competence.

Our approach rests on standards referenced frameworks, which are used to develop profiles of student development. These frameworks are achievement-based rather than curriculum-based. Curriculum standards indicate what should be taught and expected at specific grades; achievement standards indicate what has been learned and what the student is ready to learn.

There are no year level expectations in a series of achievement standards. No one is at, on, above or below expectations. Every student is simply at a level of development defined by what learning is developmentally appropriate. This approach enables differentiated and targeted teaching to occur.

Teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills

It is essential that teachers understand the discipline that they are teaching. Understanding implies knowledge of the content area as well as an understanding of developmental progression in the area or the hierarchical nature of learning in the area. For example, in the cases of literacy and numeracy, it is necessary that the expert teacher be literate and numerate as well as understand the components of literacy and numeracy and how they aggregate and combine to generate expertise.

Different subjects and levels of development call for different pedagogical approaches. The teacher needs to be flexible to ensure that teaching method and resource allocation matches individual students' learning needs. Therefore the teacher must have a large repertoire of skills known to be linked to specific learning needs in the targeted subject area. For this reason, specific professional development is often needed to maintain and enhance developing teachers' skills in discipline-specific teaching.

Student learning

An essential component of our approach is that assessment data is not used to identify problems; assessment is used to identify the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1986). This is the point at which the student is most ready to learn, and where intervention for the student will have the greatest impact.

If the point of intervention for each student is identified it is not necessary to fix problems, deficits or misconceptions. Instead the teacher builds bridges, or scaffolds, to those things the student is ready to learn. The student will learn at this point; however if there is intervention or help based around the zone of proximal development then it is possible that the student will learn faster than they will learn on their own.

Collaborative teams

Our approach depends upon teachers working collaboratively. Collaboration is not synonymous with sharing, acknowledging and supporting.

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Collaboration (working together) requires challenge, and confirmation only when supported by evidence of success. Challenge need not be offensive. Teachers need the language of challenge. Those who learn to focus on what students do, say, make or write, find it easier to challenge ideas and suggested strategies.

Teachers need to observe and encourage each other to use mutually agreed solutions and strategies. This means that teachers work in teams and do not isolate themselves within closed rooms. The fact that the team owns the ideas, strategies, applications and solutions means that all members need to share in interventions and to observe the effects. Procedures that do not work need to be investigated as much as those that do work. This builds experience.

If a teacher is advised, encouraged and supported by team members to take a particular approach and use specific resources and team members do not have the opportunity to observe outcomes directly, it is natural and appropriate that they ask what happened. This is accountability. But it is accountability without threat, fear of exposure, or the heavy hand of a top-down model of accountability.

Evidence

One of the most important elements of the ALP program is the use of evidence. Evidence is directly observable. It is not evidence if you cannot see it, touch it or hear it. Evidence is what people do, say, make or write. There are no other forms of observable evidence that we can use in the classroom.

Discussion among the team members must focus on this evidence, which in turn drives observation and teaching in the classroom. Teachers teach explicitly at the level of evidence such that they can identify change. Where there is change in what students do, say, make or write, we can infer change in what they understand, know, feel or think. These latent processes cannot be measured directly nor can they be influenced directly. To achieve these changes, we must work with the observables. Hence we focus on the

operation of team members at the level of evidence rather than inference.

Evidence is the basis of challenge. Teachers need to replace the culture of sharing with a culture of challenge. A culture of sharing is a culture of endorsement in which ideas are accepted unquestioningly. This is not a healthy or productive professional dialogue. A healthy, collaborative and supportive dialogue depends upon professional discussion and challenge of ideas. The challenge must always be a call for supporting evidence.

Identifying the point of intervention

Every student has a zone of proximal development and every student can and will learn if teachers can scaffold at and around that zone. So the importance of identifying the zone of proximal development – and therefore the focus of interventions – cannot be overstated.

To identify the zone of proximal development a test must be constructed properly and targeted at the correct range of student ability. Each student will be able to complete the easier items successfully but not the most difficult items. In between the items that the student finds easy and the items that the student finds too difficult there is a small number of items where the student struggles, and is able to succeed on some but not others. This series of items between the easy and difficult ones, where there is a mixture of correct and incorrect, defines the zone of proximal development.

Analysis of the items in the zone of proximal development and identification of the skills required to get the correct answer helps teachers to appropriately interpret those skills that the students can demonstrate and those that they cannot. Teachers then use this information to scaffold student learning. It is pointless to teach skills underpinning items that are beyond a student's ability.

Teachers do need assistance and professional development in order to help them identify this zone for students across particular disciplines. The zone is difficult to identify without a developmental

continuum, and impossible to identify in a deficit model.

The importance of having both a systematic method of collecting the information and a way of interpreting it cannot be overstated. The skill of teachers in interpreting these data is important. Teachers also need additional professional development to help them implement action plans to make the best use of the evidence they collect.

Leadership and professional development

Changing the culture of a professional team of teachers to endorse a developmental model – where it is absolutely believed that all students can and will learn if the zone of proximal development can be identified – requires a change of language. This change is not only from the language of sharing to that of challenge, but also in the language of assessment. Test scores must be seen as starting points for learning rather than endpoints of instruction. The role of team leaders in guiding this change in perspective and process is critical.

Team leaders need to be identified and offered the opportunity to train in several critical areas:

- They must become highly skilled in team leadership
- They need advanced skills in assessment and reporting that will enable them to help their team members change their language, culture and involvement
- They need additional skills in the target disciplines, for example, literacy and numeracy
- They need an intense and unswerving belief that all students can and will learn if the zone of proximal development can be identified
- They need a deep understanding of how data can be used to make decisions
- They need to understand the difference between evidence and inference
- They need to be able to identify among their colleagues those team members

who need additional professional development in each of these areas

- They need to be able to explain assessment data and assessment results to their colleagues and embed their explanation in developmental, criterion referenced interpretation frameworks.

Sustainability and infrastructure

Like every change that is introduced into schools, the ALP program provides an element of novelty. The novelty itself begins to lead to changes in behaviour. But once the novelty wears off, so too may the advantages and even the results in student learning. A strong and sustainable platform for permanent change is needed. Once again the leadership of the team is critical in this; training in leadership and change management will help to sustain change in the culture of teaching and learning.

School leadership and in particular the involvement of the school Principal is a critical component in implementation of the ALP program. The Principal who is supportive of the approach, who understands the difference between evidence and opinion and who understands how evidence is gathered and used in decision making is more likely to provide the necessary infrastructure: time must be allocated to meetings; the teaching teams often need support staff; when the team identifies a critical resource that is required, funding needs to be found; the location for team meetings has to be identified and made available; and professional development has to be guaranteed where it is needed.

Where teachers can clearly demonstrate with evidence that resources can and will lead to improved student performance the support of the Principal should be there. ■

Professor Patrick Griffin is Director, and Associate Professor Esther Care is Deputy Director of the Assessment Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne. Continuing the development of its ALP program, the Centre is now engaged in a research project, ‘The influence of evidence-based decisions by collaborative teacher teams on student achievement’, funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood.

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