

*In an environment of standardised testing, how do teachers mediate and students perceive formative assessment feedback, especially when from an external source?*

In 2013, my Master's thesis had investigated Year 5 students' perceptions of feedback from an e-assessment tool (e-asTTle). Data was gathered about their understanding and use of the feedback and their emotional reactions to it. Although the data was generally positive there were instances to the negative and, of particular concern, there were examples of increased anxiety across the range of achievement levels. High and low achievers alike were worried that their results would not be good enough or as good as the previous time. A surprising number of students were making reference to how they would compare to the New Zealand National Standards even though this information doesn't feature within the e-asTTle feedback.

I wondered whether similar online tools were available to teachers in America and if so, how they used the feedback with students to plan next learning steps. I wondered whether students' levels of anxiety about a 'test' (albeit formative) and its feedback might be higher than here in New Zealand because of the climate and demands of mandatory testing that exist there.

Right from the start of my time in America, I was taken aback by the responses I received when I mentioned my area of interest. From almost every school leader, academic, administrator or member of the public that I spoke with, came deeply held concern about the amount and purposes of the mandatory testing that takes place over there. As soon as I mentioned the word "assessment", they launched forth about "testing." Although I was able to observe in a number of classrooms, the issue of testing almost inevitably usurped my conversations with teachers around their formative assessment practice. The project then, became one where I not only kept my eyes and ears open for formative assessment practice but also sought to better understand the issues and opinions surrounding mandatory standardised testing, its policies and procedures.

Before this scholarship, I imagined that I understood a fair bit about education and society in the United States (a very naïve assumption!). Academics who I consulted prior to my application impressed on me the significance of simply "being there" and it is now, after the scholarship, that I fully appreciate their wisdom. There is no way that I could have come to understand the issues of interest or the emotions and loyalties of those involved at all levels without taking the time to involve myself with some of the peoples and cultures of such a vast nation.

On my first school visit (in Maryland), I was informed that I had arrived just at the beginning of a "testing season." Normal support programmes and intervention groups were suspended and all the computers had been pooled in order for the students to sit a 'practice' test in preparation for the Common Core aligned test that would come a couple of months later. This process occurs in the winter, spring and fall terms and, to be honest, the timetable became so complex that my head was spinning! It was a situation that became familiar as I visited both public and charter schools and it was only in private schools that there was relief from these demands.

I had wondered if there were online assessment tools in use that were similar to e-asTTle and I found that a number existed, one example being MAP (Measures of

Academic Progress). However, many factors such as the lack of detail in the feedback, formality of their delivery, the rigid scheduling of their sitting and many teachers' apparent lack of time to peruse the results meant that the tests had little or no value to teachers or students. Other than a grade e.g. Low Average, assigned to a particular skill area such as Number Sense, there was little else that could inform next steps. The concept of students themselves having access to their results and thereby having a voice in their learning was completely foreign. Assessment, in this case, was something done *to* them, rather than *for* or *with* them (Heritage, 2010). Unlike the freedom that New Zealand teachers have to create and use e-asTTle tests at any time and with any group of students, in the American schools that I visited, a strict, predetermined timetable of assessment 'events' was all that was available. Another issue that affected the usefulness of these tools was the prescriptive nature of the day-to-day curriculum and resulting inability for teachers to respond or adapt the learning programme.

I had wondered whether students' levels of anxiety to an assessment 'test' might be higher than in New Zealand because of the high stakes nature of standardised testing in America. I was able to gather plenty of anecdotal evidence from teachers, parents and students themselves and it was most concerning. Two teachers, on opposite sides of the country told me of young students vomiting because they were so anxious. Others spoke of relatively young learners taking medication to deal with the stress. Students at a private school for gifted children were animated in their relief that they were now free from the standardised testing they had been subjected to in the public system. As much as teachers and schools tried to downplay the testing, everyone knew that they were a significant event and the pressure was on to perform.

If we believe that New Zealand students should have greater ownership and understanding of their learning, we must ensure that we make the best use of formative assessment tools such as e-asTTle. Our students should be familiar with their purpose and equipped to interpret the results. We need to use the tests and results for authentic reasons and in a timely manner. Certainly, we must avoid slipping into a practice where they become an event, with its accompanying anxiety.

The practice of testing seems deeply rooted in American culture and yet deeply unpopular with almost everyone I met. In fact, many parents are now 'opting' their children 'out' of the Common Core mandated tests. Testing is a vast and powerful industry that reaches into many facets of American commerce. On both sides of the country, supermarket shelves stocked packets of 2B pencils that were, apparently, "Perfect for Standardized Tests"



Quantitative data appears to be king in America and in many states it is not only the students who are judged by the test results but also the teachers. Indeed, in Maryland, 50% of teacher evaluation comes from student scores. Whilst in Oregon, I was able to meet with an educationalist who had been involved with the “No Child Left Behind” initiative of 2001 and development of the DIBELS assessment. During our discussion around the issues and possible merits of standardised testing, he commented, “How else are the public supposed to trust teachers?”

New Zealand primary teachers are able to use formative assessment practices (such as e-asTTle), not only to plan students’ next learning but also to inform their decision-making for Overall Teacher Judgements (OTJs) against the NZ National Standards. Although some American educators were sceptical of the accuracy of OTJs, when I met with Dr Nancy Golden, then Chief Education Officer for Oregon, she was extremely impressed with the system and was excited about the professional development and teacher capacity-building that it supports. I believe we must be cautious not to take New Zealand’s high-trust model for granted and ensure that our students do not end up sitting high-stakes tests in their place.

Living and working in New Zealand, I had never imagined that the culture of mandatory standardised testing would reach beyond testing the students but I was wrong. Through a connection made at the Teaching & Learning Conference in Washington DC, I was invited to attend a Fairfax County Principals Meeting. Here I found out that teachers applying for positions within the county not only had to send in a CV but also had to sit an online Teacher Insight test. Applicants never find out what their score is but principals were advised to start interviewing from the top score down and stay within the top quartile. Teacher quality had become a quantitative art form and the online test site even gives advice about getting a good night’s sleep before sitting it.

All of this may be sounding rather dire but I was also privileged to visit a number of schools and districts where a great deal of effort is going into providing children with education that responds to their learning needs and passions. One such school is Opal School in Portland, Oregon. This charter school is actually part of a children’s science museum and I was enraptured by the strongly exploratory nature of their learning. In San Diego, I visited High Tech Elementary, where the children have dedicated Science and Engineering facilities. In Baltimore, I joined a group from Teach America to visit Liberty Elementary. This school is situated in a very depressed area but showcased self-assessment in Writing using rubrics and large, open collaborative spaces. Edison Elementary, a public school in Eugene Oregon, seeks to foster a sense of wonder and connection to the environment.

On more than one occasion, I encountered the word “joyous” being used to describe how education should be and it has stuck with me. It’s not a word that features often in our day-to-day vocabulary and yet it resonates strongly, particularly with regard to primary education. Whatever assessment practices or tools we might use, my personal challenge will be to ensure that our students’ experience of education is joyous.

This report could not conclude without acknowledging the gracious hospitality extended by my American hosts. Professor Pat Alexander and her team at the University of Maryland couldn’t have been more welcoming and encouraging. My husband (Roy) and I quickly found ourselves immersed in UMD life and have become firm Terrapins fans. Professors Yong Zhao at University of Oregon and Sheila Valencia at University of Washington helped to me to better understand issues around my topic and made us feel very much at home. This scholarship has been a

remarkable privilege and I hope I can continue to honour the investment throughout my career.

Heritage, M. (2010). *Formative assessment: making it happen in the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.