

### Observing assessment for learning (AfL) in action:

*Piloting an observation tool to inform teacher assessment learning and research*

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**Intro / Project description:** In New Zealand (NZ) we lack valid and reliable evidence-based tools with which to observe teachers' AfL, or formative, assessment practices. To date, classroom assessment observation tools have mainly been derived theoretically and/or developed within particular curriculum areas. In this project we piloted and modified an observation tool/checklist, the Developing and Evaluation Measures of Formative Assessment Practice (DEMFAP) and evaluated its usefulness and suitability for the NZ primary school teaching context. DEMFAP was developed in the USA from comprehensive video evidence.

**Aims:** The aim of this project was to bring together teacher and university partners to implement, adapt and evaluate the DEMFAP checklist for possible use in NZ primary classrooms. We saw such a tool as useful for improving, and researching, AfL practice. The following research questions guided the project:

**RQ1:** How well does the existing DEMFAP capture NZ primary teachers' AfL practices?

**RQ2:** What modifications and revisions are necessary to make the observation checklist useful and relevant in the NZ primary school context?

**RQ3:** How effective is the modified observation checklist at capturing critical aspects of the teachers' practice for research purposes?

**RQ4:** What are teachers' perceptions about the efficacy and usefulness of the modified observation checklist for improving their assessment capability?

#### Why is this research important?

Research evidence strongly supports embedding AfL within classroom teaching in order to promote agentic learning for all students. This notion is consistent with the aims of the NZ Curriculum. Furthermore, as students are increasingly expected to manage themselves as learners and work collaboratively, often in flexible learning spaces, teachers need to build students' AfL skill in support of these approaches. Although several projects have investigated how teachers' and students' AfL practice can be improved, to date we do not have observation tools capable of reliably capturing AfL practice. Such tools are needed in order to assist teachers to gain information about how they implement AfL strategies, and thus, how they might grow their expertise. Additionally, a reliable and practical tool might also be useful for researchers to measure assessment capability.

#### Key findings:

**Research question 1:** Following the first round of DEMFAP use, we found that it needed some significant revisions for use in the New Zealand context. Although we expected this, the extent of the changes were more extensive than anticipated. After using the revised DEMFAP in the second round of trials, we made a further set of changes to the checklist. While there are, no doubt, further tweaks that could be made, the revised tool was useful for identifying AfL practice during the third round of use in late 2019.

**Research question 2:** The modifications to the tool were reasonably extensive and included: removing vocabulary relating to grading, judging, assignments, testing and similar more formal terminology (less formal terminology such as quiz, marking, evaluating, tasks and activities were retained); adding space to record information about teachers working with small groups as well as whole class teaching and autonomous student work; clarifying some of the instructions; removing a number of examples that did not reflect NZ teaching approaches; adding in space to make notes about what was happening in each lesson episode to act

as a memo for peer debriefing.

**Research question 3:** Information collated across the completed observation checklists enabled us to capture how these teachers were implementing classroom AfL strategies. However, as the teachers were not always systematic in their use of the observation checklist, and due to the use of three versions of the observation checklist, further systematic study is necessary to confirm these findings. In order to assess its use for research purposes, we recommend further work on the schedule and the observation process.

**Research question 4:** While some teachers saw the relevance of the information on the observation checklist for their practice, others used the information to increase student engagement in goal clarification throughout lessons, to work with students to co-construct success criteria and to promote student self-reflection. At the school where the teachers were most familiar with AfL, the observation tool was seen as useful in providing evidence for professional discussion and for driving change in AfL practice.

#### Implications for practice

Through the iterative collaborative research process, we identified a number of ways in which both the checklist and the observation process might achieve the professional learning and development purpose we had envisaged. In summary:

- It was clear from this project that any observation checklist needs to 'fit' the local schooling context. While the DEMFAP was modified successfully, further modifications to amplify evidence about the ways in which teachers help students to develop the metacognitive skills, and motivate them to evaluate and modify their own work, are advised.
- The findings indicated that teachers need a strong understanding of what AfL is, and how to recognize it in practice in order to use an observation checklist as an effective professional development tool. Teachers need a shared language and understanding about what constitutes AfL practice and this understanding needs to be reflected in the observation tool.
- The productive use of an observation tool such as the one piloted is dependent on embedding its use within a strong professional development programme where the purpose is focused upon enhancing the quality of teachers' AfL capability. It seems that the use of an observation tool was most effective as part of a peer observation and feedback process. Teachers in this pilot project cautioned against its use as an appraisal or supervision tool.

**Our partners:** Principals Beverley Booth and Jonathan Ramsay and 10 teachers from Edendale Primary School and Devonport Primary School in Auckland worked with the university team to pilot the observation checklists designed to provide information about classroom implementation of AfL.

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