

LEARNER AGENCY AND ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN A REGIONAL NEW ZEALAND HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Assessment for Learning (AfL) pedagogies can have a significant impact on student learning and achievement. This paper reports on data from a study of four teachers and 48 student participants within a regional high school. An inquiry approach to teacher professional learning is explored through an AfL lens, in particular, how teacher feedback for professional learning can be nuanced and dialogic. The research draws from one reflective dialogue interview where a teacher explores student voice data to consider her learners' perceptions of how they learn and of the classroom learning practices of feedback, feedforward and self-assessment. The paper addresses learner agency as an important aspect of curriculum implementation for teachers and assessment for learning for students.

Key words: assessment for learning, professional learning, feedforward, self-assessment

INTRODUCTION

Extensive research evidence suggests that Assessment for Learning (AfL) practices have a demonstrable positive effect on student learning and achievement (Crooks, 1988; Black & William, 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William; 2003, Hattie, 2009; Sadler, 2009). Academics at the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning held in New Zealand in 2009, took a co-constructivist approach, defining AfL as *part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning* (Klenowski, 2009, p. 2). AfL practices can include engagement with feedback to enhance learning (on the part of the student and teacher), the purposeful use of data, and self and peer assessment. These AfL feedback processes can be embedded in the day to day and moment by moment interactions that take place in classrooms (William & Thompson, 2007).

There is a solid link between AfL and learner agency in that agentic learners make decisions about their learning (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007). In keeping with AfL, agentic learners seek out and make sense of information about their performance and achievement. As a classroom practice, where students have the capacity to act agentially to monitor and direct their own learning, AfL can address social disadvantage, increase the quality of student work and align pedagogy and assessment (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2008). This is relevant to student achievement in rural and regional schools. The AfL practices of feedback and self and peer assessment that are discussed in this paper address both students and teachers as learners and therefore target two levels of in-school learning.

The research is located in an Assessment for Learning (AfL) professional development context in a regional New Zealand high school where there was a strong inquiry-based teacher peer

coaching culture. As an in-service teacher educator, I facilitated AfL professional learning on effective pedagogy over four years with a cluster of regional and rural schools. The New Zealand Curriculum explicitly profiles a 'Teaching as Inquiry' cycle as an organising framework with the fundamental purpose of achieving improved outcomes for all students and engaging teachers to learn from their practice and enhance their teacher knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 34). This cycle is embedded in a collaborative approach to teacher learning premised on the notion that although teachers can inquire independently, it is more effective when they support one another in their inquiries. Colleagues can provide different perspectives through sharing their ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Student voice, as a sample of student perspectives, is often used in conjunction with teacher inquiry in New Zealand teacher professional learning contexts. An inquiry cycle can be seen as a teacher oriented AfL process in that teachers can seek, reflect upon and respond to a range of information (in this case student voice) as they engage in peer dialogue to enhance ongoing learning at both teacher and classroom levels.

While the research was conducted in a regional New Zealand setting, the AfL focus has relevance for rural and regional education settings in Australia and other comparable contexts where there is an interest in both targeting student achievement and developing learner agency in teachers and students (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2013; Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2008). This is a particularly pertinent issue for rural and regional schools because inclusive assessment for learning practices can be an important element in targeting and reframing the disadvantage (Klenowski, Tobias, Funnell, Vance, & Kaesehagen, 2010).

The research addresses how students can interpret teacher feedback in their classroom and what teacher feedback can look like as a coaching dialogue. Through dialogic peer coaching, a teacher explores the student voice gathered in her classroom. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate teacher feedback as a dialogic process where the teacher resists a procedural interpretation of AfL. This reflects a valuing of learner agency at both teacher and student levels.

LEARNER AGENCY AND CURRICULUM CAPABILITIES OR COMPETENCIES.

The dispositional attributes of the New Zealand Curriculum 'key competencies' aligns with a sociocultural, participatory interpretation of classroom assessment (Ministry of Education, 2007). This dispositional view highlights that learners can agentically take up opportunities to be *learner driven learners* (Watkins et al., 2007, p. 103). As Hipkins (2006) points out, 'contexts' and 'relationships' are very important to the situated view of learning embodied in the key competencies (p. 7). In particular, within social settings, the dispositional aspect of key competencies can be seen relationally as the extent that students are *ready, willing and able to engage profitably with learning* within classrooms as community settings (Carr, 2008, p. 87).

Australian curriculum commentator, Reid (2014) underlines the synergy between competencies and capabilities as the skills that are central to living in the 21st century. In Australia, they are known as 'general capabilities' (ACARA, 2013). In New Zealand they are called 'key competencies' and placed alongside the disciplines or subjects in the official curriculum. In 2012, Reid observed that ACARA faced the challenge of more than simply naming 'general capabilities'. The problem was to conceptualise their place in the curriculum if they are to be taken up by teachers.

In my view unless this conceptual work is undertaken, it is likely that just as with the versions of the generic skills and understandings which preceded them (e.g. key competencies), the take up of the general capabilities will not be widespread. Such work is even more important as the Australian curriculum moves into its implementation phase. (Reid, 2012, p. 49)

Two years later into the development of the Australian Curriculum, Reid (2014) notes that in Australia these generic skills and understandings are the least understood and the most underdeveloped aspect of curriculum and that this has left them vulnerable in the face of critique. However, the 'sustained attack' on these skills and understandings that Reid (2014, p. 2)

describes are beyond the scope of this paper. The focus in this instance is on discussing learner (teacher and student) agency as an aspect of curriculum implementation.

Taking up the notion of learner agency in relation to curricula, Biesta and Priestley (2013) argue that competence-based education shifts the purpose of Education from what students should *learn* to what they should *become*. In Australia students are expected to *develop and use* capabilities in their learning across the curriculum as an integrated and interconnected set of knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions. Capabilities are action oriented. An important feature of capabilities is that students learn how to learn and to take a lead role to initiate learning (learner agency). Therefore, it must be acknowledged that learner agency is essential to the dispositionality embedded in the Australian Curriculum capabilities. Learner agency comprises the students' opportunities to adjust and control valued learning outcomes (Willis, 2009). It follows that learner agency is fundamental to a sociocultural enactment of AfL if learners are to initiate their own and others' learning as they participate and contribute in their classroom communities.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

In her paper calling for fairer assessment in the face of escalating diversity and a systemic push for standardised testing, Klenowski (2014) argues for *a greater balance of assessment types by providing alternative, inclusive, participatory approaches to student assessment* (p. 445). Furthermore, Klenowski (2009) critiques practices that typify a procedural approach to AfL as mechanical or superficial in that they take place without the teacher's, and most importantly, the student's *active engagement with learning as the focal point* (p. 263). In rural Australian settings, teachers have reported that there is value in adopting AfL practices (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2008). The Queensland Project (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2008), was undertaken to support the development of teachers' professional capacity to explicitly assess and teach curriculum literacies and numeracies. In particular, The Queensland Project aimed to address the needs of educationally disadvantaged students in the middle phase of learning. The reported success of the project was linked with a pedagogy of AfL. The teachers reported that:

- not only did the educationally disadvantaged students fare better, but outcomes for all students improved;
- there was a greater level of student engagement in the task;
- completion/submission rates were higher;
- students in the focus group felt a greater sense of achievement;
- there was an 'upward' movement in results;
- a greater alignment of pedagogy and assessment practice resulted in more engaging and meaningful work by the students; and
- there was a significant increase in the quality of work being produced by students compared to that when they were not involved with deciding the standards and requirements (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2008, p. 45).

A key aspect of AfL that can have a significant impact on both student and teacher learning is engagement with effective feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

DIALOGIC FEEDBACK AND TEACHER INQUIRY

Much has been written about what constitutes effective feedback. However, as Willis (2014) points out, a behaviourist approach to feedback where it is conceptualised as transmission remains a powerful discourse in schools. In classrooms, teachers and students are often said to 'give feedback' to a recipient as a 'gift' whether it is wanted or not (Askew & Lodge, 2000, p. 1). Taking a sociocultural stance, Askew and Lodge describe co-constructivist feedback as a process of power sharing where there is respect and participants' experiences are drawn from and built on. It is well recognised that when peer dialogue is deliberately and explicitly engaged to support

feedback there is a positive impact on learning (Black et al., 2003; Carnell, 2000; Crooks, 2008; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Hatzipanagos & Warburton, 2009).

Dinham (2008) points out how students can also provide feedback to teachers on their performance. Rather than taking an instrumental view of feedback to teachers as a form of evaluation, the feedback to teachers embedded in this research is couched in such a way that its clear purpose is to support teachers to be responsive to their learners' needs. Game and Metcalfe (2009) indicate how in a professional dialogue all responses can be constituted as feedback. Students can engage in simultaneous feedback through their relational dialogue both with their peers and with their teachers. Termed dialogic feedback (Yang & Carless, 2013), it can be a powerful element in peer coaching for professional inquiry. Charteris and Smardon (2014) observe that *the use of a dialogic process to interpret and make sense of student voice data, enhanced teacher engagement, stimulated a careful and thorough analysis of classroom data and supported teachers to identify next steps in their professional learning* (in press). Wagenheim, Clark and Crispo (2009) highlight the importance of teachers challenging what they take for granted through a systematic approach to inquiry where they explore their deeply held beliefs.

Through a regular cycle of reflective inquiry - surfacing and challenging assumptions - teachers seeking improvement seek transformative change; change in their 'way of being' as a teacher, not just in their 'way of doing.' Becoming a better teacher is about reflecting on and questioning deeply held assumptions in an experiential cycle of inquiry, developing new strategies, testing in action, and learning. It is through reflection and resultant self-knowledge that one can leverage greater awareness of others and course content in the journey toward becoming a better teacher. (Wagenheim et al., 2009, p. 504)

An inquiry approach to teacher professional development can mirror students' cycles of AfL that have long been recognised as effective in promoting student learning (Timperley, 2009). Teacher peers can provide a valuable resource when teachers engage in feedback conversations to inquire into their practice (Charteris & Smardon, 2013).

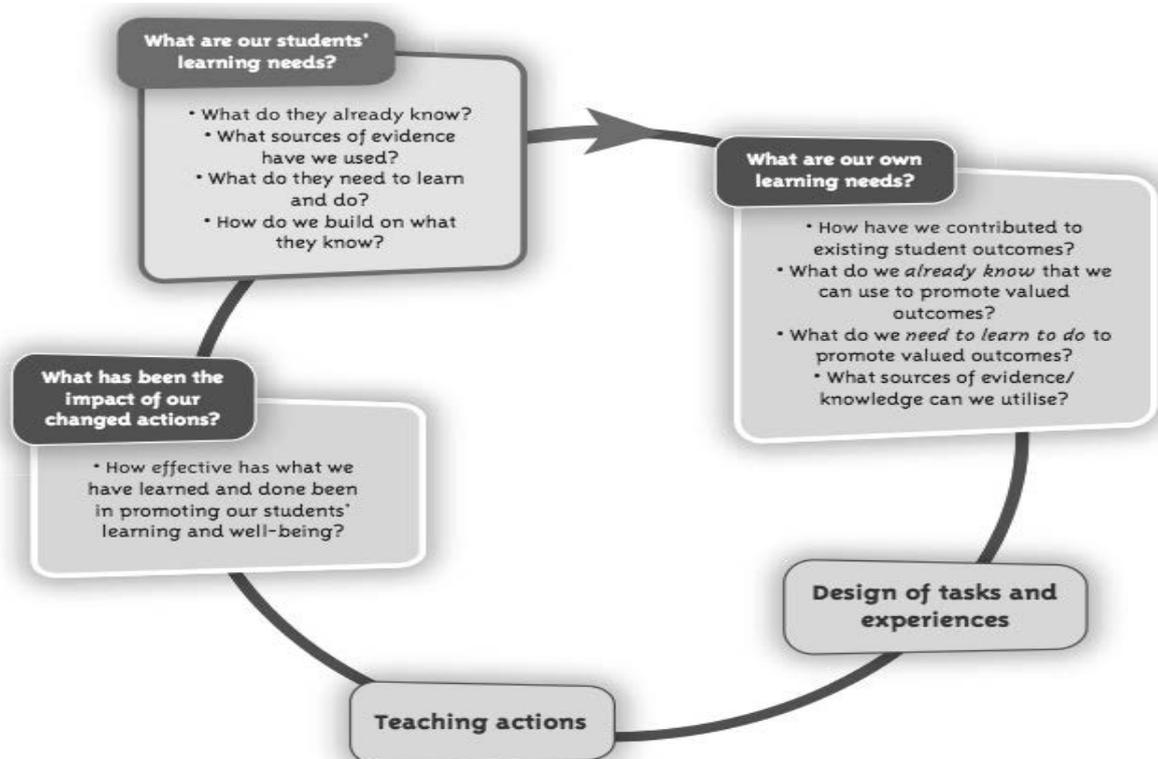


Figure 1: Teacher inquiry and knowledge-building cycle to promote valued student outcomes (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007, p.1)

Figure 1 illustrates a systematic evidence-informed iterative cycle of inquiry that emerged from a Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) meta-analysis of teacher professional learning conducted by Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007). The report was one of a series of BES iterations commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. In their BES, Timperley et al. (2007) drew together *bodies of research evidence to explain what works and why in order to improve education outcomes and to make a bigger difference for the education of [NZ] children and young people* (p. 3). The teacher inquiry and knowledge-building cycle commences with an exploration of the skills and knowledges that teachers identify to be important for them to learn more about. This can be based on curriculum-related quality assessment information that is used to identify students' learning needs. In the data sample outlined in this paper a teacher explores feedback practices in her classroom through reflecting on her actions using student voice data as a lens on her practice. This pertains to the 'What has been the impact of our changed actions?' section of the inquiry cycle above.

Building on the current teacher professional learning literature, the paper illustrates a way forward for educators in regional settings to deploy teacher level AfL practices such as dialogic teacher feedback that is embedded in processes of inquiry.

METHOD

A peer coaching approach to teacher professional learning and development aimed to both assist teachers with curriculum implementation and to embed AfL practices in their classroom to increase student achievement. More detail of this peer coaching approach is outlined in Charteris and Smardon (2014).

The research was part of a wider study that explored learner agency in a regional high school setting. At the time of the research, the school was allocated a decile two ranking (the second lowest socioeconomic category available on the scale of 1-10) by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. It is a rural state co-educational secondary (Year 7-13) school of approximately 638 students. Approximately 85 per cent of the students are Māori (New Zealand's indigenous people). Asian and Pacifica students made up one per cent of the student population. The remaining 14 per cent of students were pakeha (non Māori New Zealander). Because the school is comprised predominantly of Māori students, it was important that I adhered to research protocols for researching in indigenous contexts. While in the field I was able to consult with a colleague in her role as Kaitakawaenga Māori (or Māori cultural advisor) to ensure that my dealings with students and their whānau (family) were culturally appropriate.

Although in the wider study there were four teachers and forty-eight student participants, in this paper I closely explore the dynamic of one reflective dialogue I undertook with one year 8 teacher. The four students discussed in this article gave their informed consent to participate in the research and for audio and video footage to be taken and appropriately stored in accordance with University ethics requirements. These four were a purposive sample, selected to undertake student interviews in negotiation with the teacher. I managed my role of participant researcher carefully to mitigate the power issues associated with researching in the professional development context. The research data was confidential and was not deployed as part of quality assurance for the professional development or shared with the school senior leadership team. The participants could decline to participate in the research at any time.

Student voice was a primary vehicle in this AfL professional development. Student voice in this instance is student feedback. It was recorded to assist the teachers and students to reflect on their perceptions of how learning happened in the classroom. Much has been written about the mechanistic use of student voice that locates students as consumers and, as a schooling improvement initiative, which is levelled exclusively to promote shifts in teacher practice rather than promoting students' democratic participation in schooling (Cook-Sather, 2007; Fielding, 2006; Mayes & Groundwater-Smith; 2013). These concerns are noted in this paper, as the students were invited to contribute student feedback voice to assist in teacher professional

development. However, underpinning this approach to student voice are two mitigating factors. Firstly, the students are offered an opportunity to reflect on their own learning through the structured interview process and the teacher's analysis of the voice itself is contextualised within the classroom programme.

The student voice process, of recording their responses to specific questions, was explained to the students so that they understood that their comments were to be shared with their teacher to assist her to reflect on and learn more about her teaching. Each term, four students in each of the four classes were invited to participate in one-to-one structured interviews during a lesson within their classroom context. The questions were developed by the University of Waikato 'Assess to Learn' team (Smardon & Bewley, 2007). This paper presents the student voice comments along with their teacher's response to the experience during a peer coaching conversation or reflective dialogue with the researcher. Nehring, Laboy and Catarius (2010) define reflective dialogue as *reflection with others characterised by careful listening, active questioning and an openness to potentially profound change to one's beliefs* (p. 400). As an interchange that aims to reveal significant thinking about day-to-day practice, reflective dialogue can be seen as *scaffolded discussion about images of that practice* (Moyle, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002, p. 465). During the reflective dialogue, Patrice (pseudonym), the teacher, engaged in practice analysis (Timperley, 2011), exploring the transcribed student voice data as an image of practice. This enabled the teacher to consider her students' feedback to target the next steps for her practice.

Patrice is an experienced teacher who has taken a leadership role in the professional development project to promote an inquiry approach with her colleagues across the school. She has spoken with students in her colleagues' classes and worked with these teachers to explore meanings in the student voice data through reflective dialogue. As an iterative approach to teacher inquiry, Patrice invited the researcher into her Year 9 classroom (equivalent to Australian Year 8) to speak with her students to gather voice to assist her professional reflection. The ensuing interchange comprised a dialogic approach to teacher feedback as a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and interviewer that took place at lunchtime. The researcher adhered to a protocol where she did not interpret the student voice, but rather made space through the dialogue for the teacher to make sense of it in order to determine the direction of her own professional learning (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). Patrice used the inquiry approach outlined in Figure 1 to set goals and plan specific actions to enhance her students' learning on the basis of evidence from this student voice. The dialogue between Patrice and researcher was audio recorded as further data.

Patrice's reflective dialogue and the student voice were analysed using discourse analysis. Anderson (2009) highlights how micro, meso, and macro discourses function at different social levels. These levels are mutually constituted and operate as a double hermeneutic where each informs the other. Learning can be seen in the micro level social moment as revealed in language and social interactions. The meso level structures such as key learning areas function as a conduit between levels and therefore both contribute to the macro-scale discourses and the micro social and linguistic interactions. This interplay can serve to inform political analyses of wider societal discourses that are evident in schooling contexts.

In this paper the data were analysed at micro and meso levels. The micro discourses pertain to the meanings that were attributed to the linguistic features in the reflective dialogue and student voice texts. The meso level analysis relates to how the discourses play out at classroom and organisational level - in particular the uptake and interpretation of Afl as a discourse. The following section explores student and teacher examples of data to illustrate agency as an aspect of Afl.

STUDENT VOICES

The following student voice data was gathered in Patrice's English class during a lesson on film genres. Each student was interviewed separately. The student voice data that follows comprises four students' responses to the question: 'How do the comments your teacher makes about your learning help you?' This question provides an opportunity for students to think about and articulate what they believe about the intention of their teacher's classroom comments in relation to their learning and can trigger pedagogical reflections on pedagogy.

Mel: *There is like feedforward and feedback -what you need to know next time and how you do well. We know what to do next time and do the right thing.*

Ivan: *[The comments] tell me what I need to improve on. She puts a feedback and feedforward to tell me what I should do and what I have done.*

Darren: *[The comments] help me to do things better. (What about the things she writes?) Tells how you can do things better. She gives you a feedforward note to tell you how you can do it better.*

Kiri: *Um She puts feedforward and feedbacks and writes what we have to do and what we have already done. I just try and do what she says.*

The students' use of the terms 'feedforward' and 'feedback' (micro discourse) illustrate that these students are proficient with the meso discourse of AfL. The students reframe Patrice's classroom 'comments' as 'feedback' that is aimed to support their learning. Over the research period of three terms, I visited Patrice's classroom and noted that she was explicit about her deliberate acts of pedagogy when she asked students to engage with written and verbal feedback and look for ways to improve by thinking about feedforward. In short, the transcript data correlates to my observational data. While the students' engagement with AfL discourse can be seen as agency, in that they are prompted to take action in response to her guidance, Patrice critiques their comments to consider the implications for her practical next step actions in her classroom. Thus, she moves from making her own sense of the student voice data to the 'What are our student's learning needs?' section of the inquiry model illustrated in Figure 1. Her response to Kiri's reliance on being told *what we have to do and what we have already done* are apparent in Patrice's reflective dialogue below.

Patrice's Reflective Dialogue

After the lesson Patrice discussed the student voice collected during the class with the researcher as a reflective dialogue.

Researcher: *What are you noticing about the feedforward and feedback?*

Patrice: *They haven't done enough themselves. I think I am really modelling as much as I can and then I will let them practice on themselves and on their partner. We haven't got there....They have done a bit of self assessment themselves -because I found in my early surveys... a lot of kids found it hard to self assess. They didn't mind peer assessing and group [assessing] but they found it really hard to self assess. So this year I am thinking I want these kids to become a lot more confident and self assess...before they go on reversing it if you like... It's just about being clear in terms of success criteria and more critical of themselves. Not being afraid to make that judgement about themselves. I just know I need them to be doing a lot more self assessment and then they can move onto peer assessing.*

Researcher: *Why do you think it is?*

Patrice: *Because they listen to others. When they listen to what others say it encourages them to be more critical. I think they just seem to give each other encouragement when they are in a group. They find 'oh that's what I was thinking - I was thinking that!' They just didn't know how to say it or have the courage to say it. So they never have a problem with group assessing.*

Researcher: *Why's that?*

Patrice: *... they just feed off each other. They give each other confidence OK. Self assessing they did find more difficult. They didn't enjoy [it] so much. They much prefer peer assessment or to assess in a group...*

Researcher: *In terms of your next step what are you interested in exploring?*

Patrice: *I really want to get these kids doing a lot more self assessing. And I want them to enjoy learning... get some sort of success from and just feel good about themselves. I want these kids to realise they are responsible for their learning... and know how to. They are ultimately responsible. As a teacher I feel very accountable to my students. I do feel that I am.*

DISCUSSION

Reflective Dialogue as Dialogic Feedback

Patrice inquires into the impact of her actions through reflective dialogue as a professional learning approach. The reflective dialogue between the teacher and the researcher furnishes an example of dialogic feedback where a teacher agentically analyses student voice to generate next steps for practice. Patrice inquires into and reflects on her influence on students' learning and the opportunities she provides for them to demonstrate agency. Rather than dwelling on the students' use of AfL discourse, she analyses the data to juxtapose self and peer assessment with her teacher feedback (as articulated by the students). The student voice comments about receiving direction from her prompt Patrice to talk through the importance of self-assessment and the need for the students to make their own critical and informed judgements.

Drawing from her classroom observations and previous experience, Patrice suggests that her students find it easier to peer and group assess than to self-assess. She points out that it is through a dialogic approach to feedback that her students can make judgements on their own learning (self-assessment) and engagement in peer assessment conversations to activate each other's learning. Here we see Patrice promote her students' active engagement (Klenowski, 2009) and a desire to enhance their capacity to adjust and control the direction of their learning (Willis, 2009). Underpinning Patrice's shift in focus from teacher feedback to student self-assessment is her interest in learner agency. Patrice transcends a superficial engagement with AfL as a mechanistic recipe by considering how to engage her students to self-assess so that they are not reliant on just following her directions slavishly.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

On a cautionary note, the notion of student voice in professional development contexts is extremely problematic. It can be seen as an instrumentalist view of voice that is used to leverage shifts in teacher practice in such a way that it does not necessarily have a noticeable effect on student participation (Cook-Sather, 2007; Lodge, 2005). Harlen (2000) points out that *[s]tudents are ultimately responsible for their own learning. Thus, if the assessment information is going to be used formatively -for helping learning - then it is the student who is the user, and the student who needs the information* (p. 95). The contextual approach to student voice in this professional development provided opportunities for both students and teachers to reflect on their learning. Nevertheless, the student reflection was limited by the brevity of the structured in-class interviews and the students' perspectives are only superficially dealt with in this paper. The primary focus in this instance is agency with the teacher as learner.

While it was part of a wider study, the close examination of one teacher's reflection on classroom data in this research, gives focus to a situated conception of agency. The size of the study as a small qualitative project has no pretention of reliability or generalisability. However, it can potentially make a contribution through its relatability (Bell, 2005). The relatability of this

research pertains to the extent to which teachers and school leaders in regional and rural contexts resonate with a learning oriented approach to assessment, a dispositional approach to competencies and capabilities and dialogic teacher feedback.

There is scope for further research on the specific rural and remote schooling practices that can promote learner (teacher and student) agency. For example, how can rural and/or regional students and teachers reflect on student voice data and achievement data to develop their understanding of themselves as learners and to target what they can do to improve? There could also be an examination of how the micro and meso discourses touched on in this paper can be linked with macro discourses or socio-political influences that impact on balanced assessment (Klenowski, 2014) in rural and regional contexts.

CONCLUSION

While there have many studies exploring the nature of effective feedback, there are few studies that examine feedback as a dialogic construct that can support learner agency. AfL practices that locate learners agentially in their learning align with the essence of the Australian Curriculum general capabilities. This paper suggests that learner agency is an important element in classrooms if learners are to develop the dispositional to realise the general capabilities. Learner ownership, engagement and active participation are important elements in regional settings. Dialogic feedback as a professional development process that promotes agency has potential to support quality teacher and by extension, student learning in regional schools.

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