Exploring teacher and administrator perceptions of assessment

in the face of new assessment policies*

Joanne L. Reid
Faculty of Education, Brock University
500 Glenridge Avenue
St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1
Email: jreid2@brocku.ca

Dr. Susan Drake
Brock University
Professor, Faculty of Education, Brock University

Danielle Beckett
Faculty of Education, Brock University

ABSTRACT

Internationally and across Canada, there is a shift in emphasis in assessment to assessment *for* learning (AfL). This study focuses on elementary and secondary administrators' and teachers' perceptions of assessment in Ontario over two years in the face of changing assessment philosophy and policy. Understanding educators' experiences and tensions may ease implementation of policy. Tensions arise out of time limitations, a lack of consistency, frustration with external mandates, and resistance of colleagues. Nevertheless, these educators valued AfL as a means of fostering student and professional growth and developing relationships. The results suggested that successful implementation of AfL requires going beyond learning new assessment approaches to connecting assessment to educators' beliefs and values regarding learning, roles and relationships

Descriptors: AfL, formative assessment, teacher values, teacher change

INTRODUCTION

Internationally and across Canada, the emphasis of effective classroom assessment is shifting from summative paper and pencil testing to dynamic, ongoing assessment that facilitates the learning itself (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Carless, 2005). Black and Wiliam's (1998) seminal research demonstrated that assessment *for* learning (AfL) can improve student learning. Although subject to critique (Bennett, 2011), Black and Wiliam's conclusions have been supported (see, for example, Barootchi & Keshavarez, 2002; Black & Harrison, 2001; Lee & Gavine, 2003; Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 2002) to such an extent that provincial Ministries of Education have developed assessment policies explicitly promoting greater use of AfL. Despite such endorsement, implementation of AfL over the last decade has been slow, patchy, and superficial (Popham, 2008; Tang, Leung, Chow, & Wong, 2010; Tierney, 2006; Wiliam, 2009). Assessment experts note that Canadian educators focus on AfL techniques and strategies without a fundamental understanding of the AfL philosophy (Cooper, 2011; Earl, Volante & Katz, 2011).

Clearly, effective implementation is desirable, but why has it been challenging? This paper considers this question by exploring the experiences of southern Ontario elementary and secondary teachers and administrators facing policy changes in assessment. An understanding of their experiences and their underlying values may reveal factors that influence the implementation of newly mandated assessment policies.

Successful implementation is important given the positive role that AfL can play in improving student achievement.

Shifting Assessment Perspectives

We use Earl's (2003) and Earl and Katz's (2006) conception of classroom assessment as assessment *of, for* and *as* learning. Assessment *of* learning is summative assessment and is usually focused on the grades used to report on achievement at the end of a learning period. Assessment *for* learning is ongoing, diagnostic, formative assessment that includes assessment *as* learning through metacognition and self-assessment (Stiggins, Arter, Chappius & Chappius, 2005). In this paper, we amalgamate *for* and *as* learning under the umbrella of AfL. AfL is characterized by techniques such as questioning, self and peer assessment, strategic and descriptive feedback, and sharing, even co-constructing assessment criteria with students (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam,2003; Coffey, 2005 ;Tang, 2010).

The implementation of AfL requires a fundamental philosophical shift in traditional teachers' practice in two ways: one is regarding the purpose of assessment and the other is connected to the relationship between teacher and student (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Gipps, 1999; Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Regarding purpose, AfL shifts the emphasis from measuring achievement to providing information to teacher and student for future improvement (Black & Wiliam, 2004; Shepard, 2000; Stiggins, 2002;Tang et. al, 2010). AfL is curriculum-embedded and seamlessly interconnected with instructional strategies allowing for a dynamic process of adjustment in instruction to meet differentiated student needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004;

Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Regarding relationship, AfL redefines the roles of teacher and student by emphasizing their mutual responsibilities as collaborative learning partners (Popham, 2008). The metacognitive features of AfL encourage students to play an influential role in shaping instruction and assessment. Thus, AfL brings the teacher and student into a closer, more democratic relationship.

These two aspects of AfL – purpose and relationship – imply that its implementation is not a tweaking of traditional practices or a simple substitution of one strategy for another. Rather, by integrating instruction, learning and assessment, and by accentuating the collaborative nature of the learning and assessment processes, AfL asks educators to adopt a philosophical stance different from the transmission and judgmental model of traditional schooling.

Change and Successful Assessment Reform

Change is a profound and often painful psychological process of loss and renewal, of unlearning and relearning (Bridges, 1987; Klein, 2008; Schein, 1995). Even when the expected outcomes are positive, change is generally difficult, and often contingent on the complex interplay of external and internal factors. This seems to be especially so in education (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Tierney, 2006). For Fullan (2007), a change in beliefs follows a change in behaviour and practice. Guskey (1999) agrees that it is "the experience of successful implementation that changes teachers' attitudes and beliefs" (p. 384). Others suggest that for real and sustainable change, alteration of beliefs must come first (Goodson, 2001; Guerra & Nelson, 2008).

Whatever the sequence, research from various fields (see, for example, Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Goodson, 2001; Heath & Heath, 2010; Pink, 2009) shows that values and beliefs are closely connected, that they are powerful drivers of behaviour. When values and beliefs are aligned with proposed changes the uptake of the reform will be more effective. Tierney (2006) points out that most literature considers education reform, including assessment reform, at the system level rather than at the classroom level, but some studies do explore changes in assessment practice among individuals (see, for example, Black et. al., 2003; Carless, 2005; Coffey, Sato & Thiebault, 2005; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; McPhail & Halbert, 2010;Tang et. al., 2010). This study adds to the classroom-based literature by exploring one internal factor – educators' perceptions and stated values in relation to assessment, specifically, AfL.

METHOD

Context

This study was conducted when a draft version of a new assessment policy for Ontario, *Growing Success*, was under review (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). *Growing Success* describes assessment *of, for* and *as* learning, and promotes the use of formative assessment as an important element of a balanced assessment program. At the time of our study, Ontario educators were experiencing pressure to adjust their assessment practices to reflect the philosophy and the requirements of this policy that was to be implemented in 2010.

Participants

This two-year study was conducted in two Ontario school districts in the region around the western end of Lake Ontario. Half the population of Ontario lives in and

around this area. The student population for both districts includes a variety of cultures and socio-economic groups. Participants included 20 teachers and 17 school administrators from 24 schools in both the elementary and secondary grades. There were nine elementary teachers (ET) (eight females, one male) and 11 secondary teachers (ST) (four females, seven males). Teaching experience ranged from 3 to 28 years with a mean of 12.1. There were 11 elementary administrators (EA) (five males and six females) and six secondary (SA) (two females and four males). Administrative experience ranged from one to 20 years with an average of six years.

District A had an assessment consultant to support its assessment policy. The consultant recruited 25 participants by requesting volunteers for an assessment study. It seems logical that these volunteers would be fairly knowledgeable about assessment issues and therefore would constitute a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2008). In District B, there was no consultant and 13 participants were recruited through one of the professors in this study as a convenience sample.

Data collection and analysis

The research team was made up of three university professors and three graduate students. Year 1 (2008) involved 37 participants in semi-structured interviews (Reed, 2007; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Interviews were 45 to 90 minutes long. They were transcribed and returned to participants to be member checked. Key questions for this study were:

- *Can you please tell us a story about an experience with assessment that excited you?*

- *What do you value about yourself as an educator?*

- *What do you value about assessment and evaluation?*

In Year 2 (2009), 25 participants met in 5 small focus groups – generally grouped according to their role and grades. Sessions were between 60 and 90 minutes long and were videotaped and transcribed. The questions were similar to Year 1 questions, but this time participants were asked for specific examples of AfL strategies.

Data analysis was guided by Creswell (1998, 2008), Reed (2007), and Rubin and Rubin (1995). All data were read and reread individually by two professors (one of whom is an author of this paper) and the two graduate students who are co-authors. Categories were created, compared, and adjusted. Further analysis led to emerging themes and sub-themes. Validity of the research was determined through triangulation of the data, a member check of the transcripts, clarification of the researchers' biases, and the inclusion of discrepant information (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000; Creswell, 2008; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2005).

RESULTS

Educators' Knowledge and Values

All participants were familiar with the term "assessment *for* learning" although the extent of their formal understanding varied as evidenced in the inconsistent precision of their descriptive definitions of assessment *of*, *for* and *as* learning. One elementary administrator defined AfL like this,

> *It is where the kids and teacher are involved. There is a back and forth play. The*
>
> *kids know what they are working towards, they are setting their own goals and*

the assessment part gives them feedback so they can immediately apply it –

"Ah, oh, ok I get it" (EA1 Female).

This definition is very close to the one we give above. The same administrator explained why ideas about AfL were sometimes hazy,

> *Most of us when we were in school, when we were in teachers' college, and most of us when we go to our colleagues - [AfL] is not what we're seeing so we have to ask, "How do I make this shift in my mind? What does [AfL] look like? How do I...?" So we're experimenting together, trying together* (EA1 Female).

Nevertheless, participants used strategies usually recognized as AfL techniques such as self and peer assessment, feedback without grades, and using assessment data to evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black & Wiliam, 2004). Implementation of such strategies reflects the congruency between participants' values about themselves as educators and their values about assessment. It is evident that our participants shared Barber and Fullan's (2005) view of moral purpose and identity as revolving around improving student achievement while raising the bar for expectations and narrowing existing gaps among students. Assessment provided the necessary information to accomplish this goal.

In describing what they valued about themselves as educators, participants expressed a deep commitment to student growth and success:

> *I think it is my drive to help every student* (EA1 Female).

> *I enjoy seeing the children learn* (ET3 Female).

I am here for kids number one… our number one priority is helping our kids be

successful (SA3 Male).

I *like to believe that I give all students a fair opportunity to do the best that they*

can (ST5 Male).

Similarly, when asked about the value of assessment, responses were consistent

with this commitment to student learning:

I value assessment to figure out what [students] need…plan from there and then

actually see the difference in the children (ET5 Female).

[Assessment] can help teachers help students achieve to the best of their

potential and achieve success at whatever level they are at…that is what I value

most. (EA2 Female).

Assessment shows [students] where they are and how to improve (ST8 Male);

I think that is the greatest value in assessment and evaluation is to see where the

students are at, what can we do as a team to help them along even further (EA11

Male).

The participants' values of self as educator and of assessment are compatible with

the philosophy of AfL in building a learning culture (Black and Wiliam, 2004). As these

educators underwent the challenges of implementing AfL as a new practice, they

experienced the rewards of renewal and were sustained by the affirmation of their

professional values. However, they also encountered tensions, frustrations, and insecurity

that other studies have shown are characteristic of AfL implementation (Black et. al.,

2003; Carless, 2005; Lee & William, 2005; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Tang, 2010; Tang et. al., 2010).

The dynamic interplay of "negatives" and "positives" is explored in the sections that follow.

The Double-Face of Implementation: AfL - Hindrance or Help?

Despite the strong appeal of implementing AfL, some teachers felt conflicted about the demands on their time. Some expressed concern that the implementation of AfL risked jeopardizing their ability to cover curriculum:

> *Some of the assessment is not true assessment because you have done it so fast, especially for some students whose learning is slower. When I'm doing assessment, they're not ready for it but we have to move on*. (ET1 Female).
> *I wish I could spend more time on each thing that we do but I feel so bombarded all the time…I never have enough time to teach the regular curriculum, never mind doing all the extras which I think would benefit [students] like getting them to really reflect on why [they] didn't do well (*ST10 Female).

Some teachers expressed feelings of doubt about their professional competency. One elementary teacher spoke for many when she said: "I always feel like I don't have enough time to do [AfL] well, time to feel confident" (ET6 Female). Another said, "If you have 30 kids, it's a challenge to meet the needs of all"(ET4 Male).

Other teachers experimenting with AfL have felt similar tensions around time. For example, Harrison (2005) writes that teachers grappled with the idea that, "The emphasis is on learning and taking time to promote understanding, rather than on following and

completing a set curriculum" (p. 259). Black and Wiliam (1998) also commented on the perceived competition for time between AfL and curriculum coverage:

> …many of the initiatives that are needed take more class time, particularly when a central purpose is to change the outlook on learning and the working methods of pupils. Thus teachers have to take risks in the belief that such investment of time will yield rewards in the future, while "delivery" and "coverage" with poor understanding are pointless and can even be harmful (p.145).

While stress about time caused some of the participants to question their effectiveness, more of them were willing to take the risk of implementing AfL because they thought AfL made them better teachers, a conclusion consistent with the value they placed on facilitating student growth. All the educators, no matter the role or grade, saw the value of AfL for improving daily instruction:

> *If we assess for learning, what we are doing is we are assessing ourselves and how well we're teaching* (SA5 Male).
>
> *I think the most valuable part to assessment is you can use it as a tool to see if [students] got it, because if most of them didn't do well, then it's obvious that there's something you missed or something they didn't understand ... So you have to go back to it* (ST4 Female).
>
> *For me, assessment guides what I am doing every day…and where I need to go the next day* (ET7 Female).

The Desire for Consistency Along with Flexibility

Another source of tension was frustration with inconsistency in vision regarding assessment generally and in understanding and assessment practice among colleagues. Some teachers spoke of the "need for a common language" about assessment (ET2 Female) and that, "It is important that we are all measuring things the same way" (ET5 Female). Attaining that consistency, while desirable, was difficult. One elementary teacher said,

> *I think it would be [good] to have the time to really sit down with my teaching partners and talk about what assessment looks like in our classes…. just so that we have a more consistent basis throughout our grade level and then spread that out to the grades on either side of us but that's extremely time consuming* (ET3 Female).

At the same time, the importance the participants placed on differentiation meant they also desired flexibility regarding assessment. A secondary teacher summarized this view,

> *I meet with other department heads…and a lot of our debates have to do with consistency and making sure we are all doing the same types of things that give students fairness…But within that, if there isn't flexibility then I feel really, really handcuffed…if it gets so rigid in terms of assessment that it doesn't take into account the dynamics of a class that you might have…that's the kiss of death to me…So we need consistency, but within consistency, we need flexibility to meet*

the specific needs of different groups of kids or individuals for that matter (ST2

Male).

Participants described diversifying their repertoire of assessment tasks to respond to particular learning needs. As one elementary teacher said, "One assessment method isn't going to do the entire class" and "[assessment] has to be tailored to the individual" (ET2 Female). A positive experience with assessment that excited a secondary school math teacher was replacing a final exam with interviews because she felt that the feedback that she got on formal written tests was not really a good indication of what kids knew. While another teacher noted, "We know that a lot of kids aren't really good formal exam writers. I'm hoping this is going to shed some light and maybe open up the possibility of some alternative ways to testing. So that's exciting "(ST3 Male). An administrator (SA1 Male) recalled that his best assessment experience occurred when the materials for a major project were taken to a suspended student's house so the student could have the opportunity to complete the assignment and successfully earn the course credit.

Many teachers thought that AfL made differentiation easier and valued AfL for its ability to increase the chances of success for all students. The analogy of teacher as coach was used:

You develop those skills, you practice them, you continue to do that and it's a long

process…you are ultimately training for one major event…I give group quizzes so

they can talk to each other … so they can reflect on where they are at … just

giving constant feedback until you get to that final project or final test (ST7

Female).

Participants described assessment as offering encouraging evidence to students of

their learning. For example, an elementary teacher used conferencing and portfolios to

encourage student reflection - "for [students] to see how far they have come, to see where

they need to improve" (ET8 Female). Many participants had come to the same conclusion

as researchers, "that if one practices formative assessment seriously one will necessarily

end up differentiating instruction" (Brookhart, Moss & Long, 2010).

Resistance and Opportunity

Some educators in this study were baffled and frustrated by their colleagues'

reluctance to adopt AfL. One secondary teacher commented, "In my school, my wish

would be that everyone would get on board in terms of how to coach your students into

being successful. I don't know why there is a lot of resistance to it" (ST7 Female).

Another secondary teacher wished his colleagues would:

> *…not be so senseless about changing their practices, and not be feeling so sure*
>
> *that they are right and that they don't need to change. … the biggest problem I*
>
> *think we face right now is trying to find a way to get people to really look at*
>
> *[assessment] and not say 'well I'm not doing that, that's not what I do,' and,*
>
> *instead, see that there is a big change that's coming*. (ST8 Male).

One participant who advocated for greater use of AfL strategies, especially for struggling

students, described how staff members viewed him with suspicion, "Their concern is that

I have been planted in the building to dumb the school down so that every kid can pass"
(SA5 Male).

Participants encountered resistance to AfL in moderated marking sessions. The idea behind moderated marking is that sharing marking decisions of a common assessment clarifies understanding of performance standards. Yet moderated marking, even in familiar school settings, aroused anxiety and interpersonal sensitivity. Participants described themselves as treading carefully with colleagues:

> *You have to watch what you say … you don't want anyone walking away feeling*
> *hurt…As teachers, we take a lot of that type of thing [the discussion] very*
> *personally, and so staff [members] often shy away from doing that kind of work.*
> (ET3 Female).

Participants looked to principals to provide motivation and support for changes in assessment practices and felt discouraged when leadership was lacking:

> *AfL has been more motivating but not lately. My current principal doesn't really*
> *have any of those expectations - it's not really a priority and no one at my current*
> *school does it, so I've kind of lost touch with it* (ET7 Female).

Administrators who did take a leadership role in promoting AfL also experienced frustration with staff resistance as demonstrated in this Year 2 focus group discussion of moderated marking.

> *In my school [moderated marking sessions] have all been really friendly up until*
> *this point…and that gets you absolutely nowhere because unless somebody is*

going to disagree, you're not going to get any discussion around what the criteria are (EA8 Female).

These are the 'critical friend moments' where people need to be able to speak without being confrontational or without becoming defensive (EA4 Male).

Offsetting the potential for tension, elementary administrators also spoke of the positive and contagious effect of professional dialogue in professional learning communities (PLCs) to foster assessment literacy and change in assessment practices:

By using assessment to drive our PLCs , a lot of talking is happening. You have a couple of teachers who are your A-one teachers that you go to for everything, and you have a couple of other teachers who are hesitant, but they start to communicate more and more. It's really interesting to see those teachers move along the continuum. (EA4 Male).

Returning to the administrators' conversation, one principal happily noted that discussion in her school had shifted from resistance to a focus on the core value of student learning.

You know you're getting somewhere [when] that rich discussion doesn't become any more about your person; it becomes about the practice ... It's very focused on the kids' work and how to make them successful (EA8 Female).

Teacher participants said they appreciated opportunities to share knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of assessment.

We found that sometimes, especially as primary teachers, you get stuck on the spelling and the capitals and periods when in fact, we really needed to be looking at other things when it comes to [students'] writing - their ideas and their

organization, their details and their descriptions. When we sat back as a group,

we started focusing on the things that can get lost and so [moderated marking]

was really effective (ET5 Female).

This same elementary teacher described her excitement as she worked with teachers from three schools to develop portfolio assessment, a practice that eventually became board-wide.

We wanted to develop a way to assess children and be able to carry that

assessment forward from one grade to the next so we started this group. That was

really exciting… working through all of the different types of assessment because

I'd never had such a clear look at what exactly I could do, and how I could take

that assessment and use it in the classroom to improve learning… that was really

positive and even though that was five years ago, I continue to believe really

strongly in how that project was developed. It felt really great being on the ground

floor on that. It felt really empowering to have that knowledge and experience

behind me (ET5 Female).

Other studies have also noted the importance of opportunities for exchanging ideas and sharing experiences in sustaining the change process (see Black et. al., 2003; Brookhart et al., 2010; Carless, 2005; Coffey, Sato & Thiebault, 2005; Lee & Wiliam, 2005; Tang, 2010: Tang et. al., 2010). Because educators work within an institutional network that is both professional and social, attempting to implement new assessment practices such as AfL can be fraught with interpersonal tension. Yet, the very situations

that may prompt such tension are also situations for communal affirmation of the values

and beliefs that support change such as the implementation of AfL.

Generally, participants in this study described themselves interested in new ideas

and as assessment literate, which may explain why they had discovered AfL even if

intuitively, and why resistance to it puzzled them. One secondary teacher said:

> *Sometimes it's a hostile environment if you want people to change, If you asked*
>
> *me five years ago would I like to spend some time with assessment   and*
>
> *evaluation, I'd rather have stuck pins in my eyes. That's not a very sexy part*
>
> *of what I do, but now, if you look at how effective [AfL] could be, that's really*
>
> *huge* (ST2 Male).

Most participants were optimistic that despite initial reluctance, more widespread

implementation of AfL would occur because it appealed to educators' values. They

viewed Ontario's new assessment policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) as an

opportunity that would encourage change. As one elementary administrator said: "I

believe in [*Growing Success*]… we're not doing this because somebody told us to. We're

doing this because it's good for the kids" (EA5 Female). A secondary administrator

could foresee "that the teachers will have accepted the paradigm shift in student

assessment…Three years from now, it's because the staff will have seen the value of the

change" (SA1 Male).

Developing an Assessment *For* Learning Culture Within an Assessment *Of* Learning Tradition

A recurring theme in other studies of assessment reform is the constraining factor of credentialing/grading (see, for example, Black and Wiliam, 1998, 2004; Black et.al., 2003; Carless, 2005; Coffey, Sato & Thiebault, 2005; Shepard, 2000). This study also reflects the tension arising from a mark-oriented culture. Respondents were emphatic in their frustration over the gap between AfL and traditional ways of communicating learning, particularly grading and reporting. Educators trying to develop an assessment *for* learning culture felt constrained by an assessment *of* learning tradition. Here is how one secondary teacher described it:,

> *We have two forces pulling us in different directions. This trend toward feedback without grades and more [formative] assessment is running up against reporting more frequently for parent satisfaction…the two are hard to reconcile…and there's a lot of stress for teachers around it* (ST2 Male).

Teachers expressed discomfort with the limited and judgmental role that traditional assessment practices imposed

> *I wish it didn't have to always come down to what am I going to put on the report cards, that it could be more about learning as opposed to marks* (ET1 Female).
> *I don't like report cards. I don't like to pigeonhole a kid…I am probably a lot more comfortable going with observation than having a lot of pieces of paper to say this is an A student, this is a B student* (ET3 Female).

When the philosophy of AfL runs up against the traditional assessment culture, assessment can become an emotionally charged and hostile event as the following anecdote illustrates.

> *I had a student who got a great mark on [an assignment]. The next day she came back to me and it was very…like attacking kind of...very aggressive, yeah, very aggressive. And really her only argument was "I never get under 90 so this has to be a 90." Not about the reasoning about why, [not about] the comments, or how I can improve for my next assignment… it was "I got an 80, I should have gotten a 90, I got cheated"* (ST4 Female)!

A secondary administrator explained why giving feedback without grades – an AfL strategy – was difficult:

> *I think one of the problems is that we don't know how to give appropriate feedback to kids. We think it's that red mark at the end of the paper and we know part of the problem for us is, even when you try to give better feedback so that the formative stuff is happening, [students] don't know how to use the feedback. They don't care about the feedback. And the parents don't know how to use the feedback and don't care about the feedback. All anybody looks at is the final mark. That's what they value. We have to change our value system. …. part of the problem you face in trying to move towards better practices is [students] want to rate each other. They want to compete. The parents want to be able to say "my kid's a better student than your kid, and the number says that, so that's all I care about."' So it's hard for teachers* (SA5 Male).

The following secondary teacher's words conveys his distress when his use of feedback without grades had not been well received:,

> *[Students and parents] have an obsession with the number…The number should be some sort of indicator as to the completeness of your education, but that doesn't really connect with them. They see it as this thing out there that they have to chase, and "I have to get that so I can go to the next chase". I just want to put the emphasis back on being well educated; that's the goal…They're not interested in what they learned. They are interested in getting a mark to get the credit... To me, that's horrible* (ST2 Male).

Our participants were not alone in experiencing tensions between summative and formative assessment purposes. Their words closely parallel those of other educators in the midst of changing assessment practice (Black & Wiliam, 2004; Black et. al, 2003; Coffey, 2005). For example, a British teacher said,

> *Everyone is obsessed with numbers rather than what kids really know. I think parents don't put a lot of weighting onto teacher assessment…They want to be able to compare [the grade] with everyone else even though it is not about everyone else* (Black & Wiliam, 2004, p. 44).

 Educators who are early adopters of AfL might need to be resilient risk-takers to withstand the pressure to conform to established assessment expectations and practice.

Despite the tension between an AfL approach and traditional practice, participants often described assessment as a positive experience. Their preferred style of assessment was not a distanced, objective summative judgment. Rather, it was situational and

relational, offering opportunities to develop caring relationships with their students. Elementary, and even more emphatically, secondary educators, said they developed positive relationships with students through assessment feedback. For example, an elementary teacher described feedback as the best part, because kids will go "she really understands what I'm doing rather than being a mark on a page" (ET3 Female). A similar statement came from a secondary teacher:

> *I think [connection with students is] probably one of the most important things, because if you don't have a relationship with them, it's very difficult for them to listen to you, it's very difficult for them to want to do well because they feel like they have no stake in it, they don't know you* (ST4 Female).

Many participants fostered collaboration between student and teacher and demystified the assessment process by inviting students to co-create rubrics, to analyze exemplars, and to self and peer-assess against clearly established criteria. "We talk a lot about expectations before we start doing a piece of work." said an elementary teacher (ET2 Female). Student-created tests and projects, taking and marking practice tests in groups, alternative assignments and do-overs were given as examples of strategies that privileged learning over grading. This teacher's best assessment experience story demonstrates many of the key ingredients of effective AfL,

> *The kids worked on a project in groups with wiki boards, which is an internet space where students can interact and modify their projects on the go. ... so as they're modifying, it's instantaneously demonstrated to all the others who are watching at the moment. The kids analyzed each other's strengths and*

weaknesses, who brought what to the table in terms of the contribution of their

assignment. It was just interesting, the dialogue between the students… "That's a

great idea", and "Maybe we should go with that," and the revisions, the

deletions, the additions… and just their own diagnosis and their own formative

assessments of what they themselves did well and what their group members did

well. I thought it was a really neat concept to see it live, not just verbally, but

visually as I watched… monitoring while circulating the class, but also from my

own laptop (ST1 Male).

Marshall and Drummond (2006) made a distinction between the spirit and the letter of AfL, the letter being the strategies that professional development sessions in response to reform in assessment policy might prompt. However, it seems that effective AfL goes beyond strategy by being a more holistic approach that rests on teacher beliefs and values. Steinberg (2008) went even further saying,

The emotional rules underlying formative assessment are more demanding of the

personhood of the teacher. Teachers are unlikely to change their assessment

practice from summative to AfL, unless they change both their beliefs and also

their emotional rules (p. 53).

Our participants were already assessing according to beliefs and values that prioritized student learning, but were caught in an uneasy relationship with traditional practices.

DISCUSSION

It seems almost a given to say that educators' response to the work they do is connected to the personal beliefs and values that shape their views of their profession and

of themselves (Day & Smethem, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2005; Palmer, 1998; Reio, 2005; Williams-Johnson et. al, 2008;). By extension, what is assessed and how assessment is conducted reflect those beliefs and values (Green, Johnson, Kim, & Pope, 2007; Steinberg, 2008). Gipps (1999) wrote that, "To see assessment as a scientific, objective activity is mistaken" because, from a postmodernist perspective, assessment is "value laden and socially constructed" (p.370). Brookhart (2004) agreed that "all assessment processes are, at heart, social processes, taking place in social settings, conducted by, on and for social actors" (p. 451).

It is fitting then, to consider the connection between a change in assessment policy and the inner lives of the educators expected to implement it. Accomplishing educational change can be difficult; conservatism, individualism, and the persistent adherence to the present feed resistance (Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). In examining assessment alternatives to paper-and-pencil techniques such as performance- and portfolio-based assessments, Hargreaves, Earl, and Schmidt (2002) noted similar obstacles to reform. The longevity of these inhibiting factors reminds us that assessment reform has been, and is likely to continue to be, a long-standing challenge.

Anticipating the mandate of *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), teachers and administrators in this study were responding to the challenge of change. Tensions arose out of time limitations, a lack of consistency, frustration with external mandates, and resistance of colleagues. Participants also called for changes in

the educational system and in popular attitudes – changes that would reflect a deeper appreciation for a non-competitive learning culture within and beyond the school context.

Nevertheless, acting as a counterbalance was the appeal of AfL as a tool for student and professional growth and as a vehicle for developing relationships. The values and beliefs that our participants held about themselves as educators and about assessment in general made them aware of the gap between traditional assessment practices and their own sense of professional purpose. Both elementary and secondary educators in this study welcomed assessment practices that deepened their understanding of their students' learning processes, helped them improve their teaching, directed them to develop differentiated instruction, and fostered relationships. When participants took the risk of implementing innovative assessment practices that were more aligned with their values, they faced, but were not defeated by, challenges and tensions. Indeed, they were optimistic that others would eventually come around.

This study aligns with findings from other jurisdictions undergoing assessment reform (Ottewell, Blackstock & Rose, 2008). From their case study on teacher change Coffey, Sato and Thiebault (2005) concluded that,

> *Action was not merely the implementation of a new idea. It was the means through which the teachers developed understandings about their beliefs and assumptions. It enabled them to challenge existing views and see new possibilities. The change process that we now understand from our teachers does not support a notion of dissemination that relies on teachers 'implementing' ideas presented to them by*

others. The apparent success of a particular innovation depends at least as much

on the teacher as on the merits of a new technique or strategy (p. 183).

When educators find subjective meaning in an innovation, they are far more likely to

engage in its implementation. (Fullan, 2007; Hunzicker, 2004; Shulman, 1999). The

implementation of new assessment practices by the educators in our study represented the

felicitous interconnection of beliefs, values, and strategies. This combination seemed to

provide the stamina to persevere despite frustration and difficulties.

CONCLUSION

It appears that if we want new assessment practices to take hold, we must consider

more than policy imposition and professional development to develop techniques. We can

predict that educators will experience tensions in the face of innovation and new

assessment policies. To ameliorate these tensions, we should also consider the alignment

of the reform with educators' beliefs and values regarding learning, roles, and

relationships. In doing so, educators may act from a genuine inner motivation for change

rather than shallow compliance with externally imposed mandates. As a result,

assessment reform may actually stick.

Corresponding author: Joanne Reid
1150 South Monck Drive, Bracebridge, ON P1L 1W8
705-645-6697
jreid2@brocku.ca

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