

Co-operative assessment and Maori children

Yvonne Feast

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Is there value in children engaging in peer assessment and self-assessment? This is a very important issue as assessment is a vital part of learning and teaching. Certainly the Ministry of Education (1994) considers that peer assessment and self-assessment are important elements of school assessment, for example, “All students need to become involved in the process of self-assessment...at an early age” (p.18).

A number of benefits are claimed for children engaging in self-assessment. For instance, Hill (1995, pp.186-188) mentions that it

1. provides motivation and feedback about what the student knows and understands,
2. informs the student about how he/she is doing as a learner,
3. enables students to discover how best they can learn and how they prefer to learn,
4. can boost student self-esteem,
5. can lead to better learning, and
6. allows the learner to assume the role of both obtaining the information (assessment) and interpreting it (evaluation).

These benefits are echoed by other writers. Isaacs (2000) suggests that self assessment helps learners examine their own work critically and enables them to improve it. Carr (1994, p.210) indicates that self-assessment can enable children to, “...reflect on their feelings and level of confidence, and comment on what they still need to get to grips with.” Self-assessment is seen by some educators as perhaps the most powerful form of assessment there is (Biddulph, Bell & Carr, 1989). Stenmark (1991, p.6) explains why this is so: “The most

effective assessment of all is that of one’s own learning... Students who develop a habit of self assessment will also develop their potential for continued learning.” As Carr (1994) points out, the drive for individual assessment of our students makes self-assessment an attractive alternative form of assessment. He writes that self-assessment, “...has its roots in constructivist learning theory. This learning theory argues for students accepting a greater responsibility for their own learning.”

While these various benefits seem reasonable, some teachers I have spoken to are more cautious. In their experience, for example, portfolios can be overused and

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children can get quite sick of formally assessing themselves if it is done constantly.

Less seems to be written about peer assessment. Isaacs (2000) mentions that it can be a good way for students to get useful feedback on their work from someone other than themselves or their teacher, and that it can provide them with insights into the criteria used to assess their learning. However, Isaacs makes the point that students need ‘training’ to engage in both peer and self-assessment, especially if they are doing it for the first time. For instance, they will probably need help, “...to understand and be able to apply the criteria to the work they are assessing” (p.2)



Yvonne Feast
School of Education
University of Waikato

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and they may need to be shown how to give effective feedback.

It appears that if self and peer assessment are used wisely, then they could be valuable forms of assessment to incorporate into a primary classroom. But are they appropriate for Maori children? I want to argue that, while both may have a place, a better alternative is what Carr (1994) refers to as ‘cooperative assessment’.

Self and peer assessment both focus on the learner as an individual. Maori, on the other hand, work much better in groups or pairs than they do on their own. From my own upbringing and experience I know this is as true for Maori children as it is for Maori adults, and it has always been the way.

Traditionally most things in Maori families were done together as a family, for example, growing and gathering food. Then there is the Tuakana/Teina system where older children help younger ones. This process of working together is carried through into Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa schooling and total immersion units where great importance is placed upon promoting ‘whanaungatanga’, that is, fostering a family atmosphere. It follows, as Forbes (1994) has pointed out that, from a Maori perspective, assessment should

reflect Maori cultural values. Forbes (1994, p.353) goes on to say that, “... students should be encouraged to develop their own assessment procedures.” I want to suggest that these should be largely within a cooperative assessment model.

Cooperative assessment, according to Carr (1994), involves assessment of the work of a group, usually by their teacher, but there is no reason why this could not be done by the group members themselves. Indeed, Carr mentions such a case where a lot of learning occurred during the cooperative assessment activity itself. As Carr says, “There is little research in the area.” I think it would be really valuable for a number of teachers to do some action research trying out cooperative assessment with Maori children, and then sharing their ‘stories’ by telling us (writing some articles) about what happened.

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