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Abstract
By fully understanding the value of student self-assessment, teachers, parents, and students will be better equipped to encourage each student’s educational strengthens and to support each student’s educational needs, in order to make the necessary and needed adjustments for success. The purpose of this article was to investigate, research, and understand the assessment strategy referred to as student self-assessment or self-evaluation. Research was conducted to define student self-assessment, to review the benefits of self-assessment for all stakeholders, and to provide suggestions and ideas to implement within a classroom prior to incorporating student self-assessment.

“Teaching and assessment should not merely be something that teachers do to their pupils” (Wragg, 2001, p.65).

Introduction
Teachers are continually seeking alternatives to traditional testing methods, by re-evaluating their assessment strategies or practices and altering their evaluation techniques, in order to assess and evaluate in a holistic manner. The results are a more authentic and trustworthy view of student achievement (Hart, 1994). Stiggins (2001) clearly stresses the importance and value towards sound assessment by creating balance amongst assessment practices within the classroom. Assessment can be collected, interpreted, and judged through selected response, essay, performance, or personal communication methods. Graves (1983), as cited in Hart (1994), states “assessment was assumed to be the exclusive domain of teachers. Armed with red pencils and report cards, they alone were responsible for evaluating student achievement and assigning grades” (p. 59). However, should “teaching and assessment…merely be something that teachers do to their pupils” (Wragg, 2001, p. 65)? No, incorporating the thoughts, feelings, and views of the key stakeholders – the students – within the classroom is critical towards understanding their progress and achievement. Establishing a collaborative perspective towards each student’s learning is an effective tool for accurate and reliable assessment interpretation (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000). The student is an important, valuable, and precious participant in the assessment process. By asking students about their learning, educators can gain tremendous insight about students’ thoughts, growth, learning, and understanding that would otherwise not be accessible.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and research the assessment strategy referred to as student self-assessment or self-evaluation. It is my intent to present current research and information at a very practical level in the hopes of other educators incorporating the various student self-assessment ideas, strategies, and approaches into their classroom learning environments. This article will:

• outline and describe what student self-assessment is,
• discuss and review why the implementation of this assessment strategy is so powerful, and
• incorporate and provide research that outlines some suggestions and ideas to consider, or implement, prior to expecting students to independently self-evaluate within the classroom.

Through this paper, I hope to promote the value of student self-assessment and what would happen if students were asked to tell educators about something at which they are experts – themselves.

What is Self-Assessment?
Our ultimate goal in education is to promote lifelong learning skills in the hopes of developing
independent learners. A major component of independent or autonomous learning is each individual's ability to assess his or her own strengths, weaknesses, and progress (Self-Assessment, n.d.). Unconsciously, students are regularly and continuously self-assessing. When they draw a picture or write a story, they form an internal opinion or notion of “what is right or wrong, what fits and what does not, [and] what is a ‘good enough’ job” (Berger, 1991, p. 37). “It is a commonplace part of learning” (Boud, 1995, p. 11). Student self-assessment is a continuous process where students get to know and understand themselves as learners (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994). Hindley (1996) believes self-assessment is an opportunity to visualize how a child sees himself/herself as a learner, from his/her point of view. Hewitt (1995) views self-assessment as the “transition from working with the hopes of meaningful response[s] from one’s mentor to the state of responding to one’s own work” (p. 174) while Fenwick and Parsons (2000) define self-assessment as “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgments about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards” (p. 103). Boud (n.d.) simplifies this definition by stating that student self-assessment involves “students taking responsibility for monitoring and making judgments about aspects of their own learning” (cited in Somervill, 1993, p. 35).

Student self-assessment involves students in:

- reflecting on their performances, products, thinking, and learning,
- monitoring and regulating what they are doing while they are doing it,
- evaluating the quality of their work and knowledge,
- setting realistic goals for themselves,
- planning ways to achieve these goals
(British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994).

Hill and Ruptic (1994) clearly distinguish between self-assessment and self-evaluation. They believe self-assessment tends to “focus more on the ongoing process of learning” (p. 163), answering questions such as “‘How do I learn best?’ and ‘How am I growing?’” (p. 163) while self-evaluation is “more summative in nature and involves more appraisal” (p. 163), where students would ask themselves “‘How did I do?’ and ‘How have I improved in this area?’” (p. 163). Regardless of the term, self-assessment or self-evaluation is a metacognitive cornerstone that leads students towards a stronger understanding of themselves (Hill & Ruptic, 1994). In his article entitled Assessment and the Gifted, Professor Don McAlpine (2000) summarizes student self-assessment effectively as a reflection on past achievements, a critical evaluation of present performance, and a plan for future goals.

For the purpose of this paper, student self-assessment and self-evaluation will be used interchangeably and be operationally defined as a student’s ability to reflect and make judgments upon his/her work and efforts, to monitor his/her abilities, and to set realistic goals to develop growth and understanding.

What are the Benefits of Self-Assessment?

The data and information collected by including students in self-assessment or self-evaluation are fundamentally different from the information collected through testing alone. According to Wagner and Lilly (1999), when quality or authentic assessment isn’t ensured “a narrow picture of what children know and can do” (p. 32) is provided since his or her test responses are limited to the educators’ questions. By providing opportunities for students to respond towards personal learning, educators develop a true sense of each child’s authentic perceptions. Graves (1994) states:

Learners of all ages have passed their work on to someone else for evaluation without participating in the process themselves.

Yet children spend 99% of their time alone with the topic they are writing about or book they are reading. During those hours they need to know how to say to themselves, ‘This is what this is about…no, it isn’t about that, it is this’ (cited in Wagner & Lilly, 1999, p. 33).

Student self-assessment provides all classroom stakeholders – parents, teachers, and students – with an opportunity to better understand each student’s educational strengths and needs, in order to make the necessary and needed adjustments for success.

Parents

The first stakeholder that can benefit from student self-evaluation is the parent. Student self-evaluation can provide opportunities for parents to gain insight or awareness into their child’s thinking and learning, and provides a means to help parents communicate about their child’s learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994). Each afternoon when students arrive home from school, they are faced with the question, “What did you learn in school today?” I have heard from many parents that the common
response is “Nothing.” Through the incorporation of self-assessment that nothing has the potential to turn into a lengthy and detailed discussion. I believe that if students self-assess they are more inclined to remember their learning in order to describe the learning process and activities to their anxiously awaiting parents.

Another benefit and strategy used to include parents in the self-assessment process is to send home frequent copies of their child’s self-assessment activities. Not only does this open the door to home-school communication, but it provides opportunities for parents to openly talk to their child about their thoughts, feelings, and goals for the future; therefore, encouraging parents to become active participants in their child’s education (Hart, 1994).

**Teachers**

There are numerous benefits for teachers who choose to incorporate student self-assessment into their daily classroom activities. To begin with, teachers can acquire useful information for instructional planning and delivery in order to meet the individual needs of all students. “Looking at the students’ [assessments and evaluations], the teacher knows exactly where to place emphasis in instruction” (Hewitt, 1995, p. 177). By having students self-assess, educators can learn:

- if students have internalized and understood the lesson;
- if students enjoyed or didn’t enjoy a particular activity and why; and
- where students’ personal interest levels lie (Schmar, 1995).

This information enables educators to analyze and improve their teaching practices and assists them in becoming aware of individual learning styles.

Student self-assessment also provides teachers with a different perspective or view towards students’ work (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994). It is my belief, that through the use of this process we are better able to see where a child is coming from, why they think or feel a particular way, or how they have reached a particular thought or answer. This different perspective is key to understanding the entire child.

A third benefit for teachers and also for students is that assessment and evaluation become a shared responsibility (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; McAlpine, 2000). This collaborative relationship or partnership, between teacher and student, I believe strengthens their personal connection and provides an open environment where risk taking is possible. After all, “it’s easier to build a wonderful learning environment and a warm community feeling when we ask the children to contribute in meaningful ways” (Picciotto, 1992, p. 14).

A final advantage provided for teachers is an insight into the student’s social, emotional, and intellectual needs and strengths (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994). Our goal through self-assessment is to help our students create a view of themselves as a learner, through both their strengths and their weaknesses, where the process of learning is equally if not more important than the final product. By encouraging self-assessment we are able to concretely understand each student’s intellectual ability, his or her joys and sorrows, likes and dislikes, as well as how each one feels socially within the school community.

**Students**

Finally, and most importantly, what are the benefits of self-assessment for students? The benefits are numerous! “Encouraging students to reflect on their own actions, ideas, and creations…enables them to foster their awareness and understanding of their own learning process” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 163). This empowerment over their own learning assists students to understand themselves and their work at a deeper level while becoming aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and progress (Gordon, 1992; Hill & Ruptic, 1994). In essence, it requires tremendous metacognitive abilities or encourages students to “think about their thinking” (Schmar, 1995, p. 185).

A second benefit for students is that self-assessment helps students to “set appropriate learning goals and plan ways to achieve them” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 2). Students are able to monitor their learning process to be sure they are pursuing their pre-established goals or the criteria needed to achieve curriculum and personal success (Boud, 1995; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; McAlpine, 2000).

A third benefit and one that I feel passionate about, is that student self-assessment develops positive self-esteem, self-concept, and self-image (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; Fenwick & Parsons, 2000; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). When students are able to visually and reflectively see their progress improve, confidence in their own ability as proficient learners soars. Personally, it gives me great pleasure to have students excitedly approach me and share the realization of their success. Having records or proof of their accomplishments and being able to see their growth in learning, when they compare their
early work with their current work, is a valuable and formative assessment technique. It is extremely satisfying as a teacher to have your students realize the significance and value in learning!

In my personal opinion, another strength I see towards student self-assessment is that it is completely individualized – there is no right or wrong. Each student’s mental models will view or interpret events, lessons, or ideas differently, which makes each self-assessment individual (Senge, 2000). From my experience, students don’t feel pressured by time or pressured to get the correct answer because truly the answer lies within them.

A final benefit of self-assessment that I believe warrants attention is that it enables students to take responsibility and ownership for their own learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; McAlpine, 2000; Schmar, 1995). Responsibility and ownership are developed when students monitor their work and progress and when “they take control of activities” (Glazer & Brown, 1994, p. 63). When goals are established or criteria set, students become highly motivated to work towards and meet these standards (Fenwick & Parsons, 2000). As M’Gonigle (1995) verbalizes in her audio interview, with self-assessment “students recognize their own strengths and weaknesses...[and] do a better job at correcting them. It is their plan, they own it, and they really want to make it work” http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/ students/learning/mgonig3.au. In Hofer D’Urso’s (1996) study entitled What Happens When Students Take Part in Their Own Assessment, Joyce’s findings parallel the previously mentioned benefits. She discovered that when students took part in their own assessment, their sense of self improved, their work became more meaningful, they discovered an inner ‘voice’, and they reflected on what they knew and what they needed to discover (goal setting). Providing opportunities for students to self-assess or self-evaluate impresses upon each student that he/she is important and that his/her feelings and thoughts are important to us as educators (Picciotto, 1992)!

The process of self-assessment can be highly illuminating for many students by providing them with a sense of pride, ownership, and responsibility; however, it should also be noted that for some students the process of self-assessment could be debilitating. Some students can set extremely high expectations and be very hard on themselves, which can destroy self-esteem and self-confidence instead of intensify (Wragg, 2001). Therefore, if self-assessment is to exercise positive effects it must be introduced, conducted, and monitored in a sensitive and well planned manner.

How to Begin – Getting Started

The introduction of any new teaching and learning technique is likely to gain some resistance. After all, being comfortable and confident with any new strategy takes time, patience, and practice for both teachers and students (Boud, 1995). Many of the primary students we teach have little or no experience in self-assessment and may be uncomfortable with the process at the beginning. They are accustomed to receiving external feedback from the teacher and not aware of the power that internal feedback can provide. Prior to integrating self-assessment into the classroom, four elements or skills must be considered:

- the classroom environment,
- the skill of reflection,
- the establishment of criteria, and
- the process of goal setting.

Classroom Atmosphere

For student self-assessment to be an integral component of learning, beginning the first day of school, “the classroom atmosphere must be one of acceptance of all students regardless of their developmental level” (Schmar, 1995, p. 189). This atmosphere of acceptance can only be established if students feel comfortable within their classroom environment to share their thoughts and feelings. Students must feel free to make choices, speak openly, and record experiences. A safe environment, that encourages risk taking and where students will be positively received, by peers and the teacher, creates a feeling of acceptance and warmth within any classroom. From my experience, some children are more willing to take initial risks and I struggle with those students who are more reluctant. What I found to be quite effective in encouraging risk taking is modeling the behaviour and then focusing on the students’ attitude of acceptance. On the chalkboard each morning I write a morning message to my students that includes grammatical errors. At times, my focus is on punctuation skills or phonetic skills but initially I focus entirely on reinforcing the encouraging and appropriate comments and suggestions that students supply me. This shows students that I understand they are supporting and helping me, not hurting me. I believe these are the initial stages of an open and accepting classroom environment. The classroom atmosphere must also actively involve students in their learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994). In my opinion, this is key. Our students “need to know that they can voice their feelings, opinions, and ideas”
Goal Setting

In order to reach that goal, students must be provided with plenty of opportunities to practice reflection to ensure meaningful self-assessment. A second technique teachers can use to get their students thinking about their learning is questioning. By questioning, students are probed to think about their prior knowledge, their learning process, the reason behind their response, and their future goals (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; Wagner & Lilly, 1999). Possible questions could be “What do you already know about…?”, “How did you do…?”, and “How could it be improved?” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 5). It is important to note that reflection does not have to be a solitary activity. In fact, when students share their reflections it provides other students with a different perspective or strategy for themselves to consider and encourages deepened discussion as to their reflective rationale. After all, “reflection allows students to internalize, take ownership of, and apply successful strategies from one situation to the next” (Courtney & Abodeeb, 2001, p. 5).

Establishing Criteria

Students should never wonder about expectations in learning; therefore, an essential component needed for self-assessment is the development of clearly articulated criteria (Foster, 1996). The British Columbia Ministry of Education (1994) defines criteria as “guidelines and characteristics by which learning is monitored and evaluated” (p. 6). Criteria can be established independently by the teacher or collaboratively with the students as suggested by formative assessment practice (Stiggins, 2001). From my experience, involving students in the formation of criteria towards a concept or project creates a more meaningful experience for the students. Students feel a sense of ownership and are more conscious in monitoring their progress against the criteria. For example, at the beginning of the year, my grade three students established the criteria for a writer’s workshop entry. We looked through books and I modeled and demonstrated effective writing skills, and my students then decided that all entries should contain capitals, periods, and spaces between the words. This was hung on the wall, and always referred to—students could independently self-assess. As the year progresses and their writing awareness and ability increases, we have added and modified the criteria list to include appropriate punctuation, sentence structure, and editing. This collaborative criteria has made publishing the students’ work a non-complicated task. By establishing criteria, students know exactly what they need to do to succeed and can monitor their progress in order to reach that goal.

Reflection

Student self-assessment includes the students’ reflection of their learning. Courtney and Abodeeb (2001) define reflection as “the ability to closely examine one’s own learning at any given point in time” (p. 5). As teachers, we can’t expect our students to reflect on what they have learned without guidance or support; we must demonstrate or model effective reflection skills (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; Schmar, 1995). For example, I have verbally modeled, to my grade three students, my understanding of how I know the answer to 6-3. By voicing my understanding of having ‘6 objects and subtracting 3 objects from it, I can understand by counting why 6-3=3’ or by voicing my understanding of ‘reversing the math sentence, I know that 3+3=6.’ Modeling provides our students with ideas or strategies on what they can do to reflect on their learning. Students must be provided with plenty of opportunities to practice reflection to ensure meaningful self-assessment. A second technique teachers can use to get their students thinking about their learning is questioning. By questioning, students are probed to think about their prior knowledge, their learning process, the reason behind their response, and their future goals (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994; Wagner & Lilly, 1999). Possible questions could be “What do you already know about…?”, “How did you do…?”, and “How could it be improved?” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 5). It is important to note that reflection does not have to be a solitary activity. In fact, when students share their reflections it provides other students with a different perspective or strategy for themselves to consider and encourages deepened discussion as to their reflective rationale. After all, “reflection allows students to internalize, take ownership of, and apply successful strategies from one situation to the next” (Courtney & Abodeeb, 2001, p. 5).

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Goal Setting

Similar to reflection, goal setting must be taught and modeled to ensure that appropriate and attainable goals are established. Here, teachers and students can collaborate together to create intellectual, social, and emotional short-term or long-term goals for the school year. Schmar (1995) provides a modeling example of a short-term goal that incorporates maintaining a clean desk space. She begins the modeling process with a messy desk and through her two-week time frame displayed ‘considerable improvement,’ according to her students. She then establishes another short-term goal and invites her students to choose their own personal goal. Similar to establishing criteria, goals should be posted within the classroom and referred to continuously (Hart, 1994). Through the goal setting process students must consider their strengths and weaknesses, relate to established criteria, identify the steps and resources available to succeed, and create an action plan (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994). As educators, our responsibility is to guide our students to develop and set realistic and attainable goals (Courtney & Abodeeb, 2001). Once the stated time frame for the goal has expired, students determine if their goal has been met. If they are successful, they celebrate and plan a new goal; if they are unsuccessful, they rethink their action plan to make their goal achievable. When students have been through this goal setting process numerous
times, they begin to independently, without teacher support or assistance, establish individual goals, as they deem appropriate. Students begin to realize that lifelong learning is the “continual process of goal setting, practicing, and evaluating progress” (Schmar, 1995, p. 189). Once students are comfortable with reflection, understand the value of established criteria, and can set realistic goals for themselves they are physically and emotionally ready to experience self-assessment.

Conclusion

Student self-assessment is one assessment technique available to teachers to incorporate in their current assessment strategies. By providing a safe classroom environment where risk taking is encouraged, self-assessment can provide teachers with valuable information towards their students’ thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Combining reflection and goal setting along with ensuring a set criteria, students will have the tools to monitor and self-assess their progress in order to reach their personal potential. Student self-assessment provides numerous benefits for all classroom stakeholders. A home-school communication relationship can be strengthened and parents will be increasingly informed as to their child’s learning, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions towards school. Teachers gain an understanding of the whole child and can make educational adjustments within the school community to assist with each child’s academic, social, and emotional development. However, it is students who reap the benefit. They develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning while increasing their confidence and self-esteem. Self-assessment provides students the opportunity to question, reflect, and to achieve personal understanding. This is what lifelong learning is all about!
References


