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Assessment and learning: an in-depth analysis of change in one school's assessment culture

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of new assessment policy can reverberate throughout all levels of schooling. This paper presents an in-depth investigation into one school's response in the Junior years of secondary education to the introduction of a new Senior years' assessment system. The investigation focuses on the educational context of a high-performing school where school leaders decided to prioritise learning rather than summative assessment in the Junior school. The findings reveal the practices required to make critical changes to the assessment culture and related assessment systems for the school, within a context of national assessment accountabilities and high community expectations. These practices include the collaboration of school leaders with teachers, students and parents to drive change while maintaining high performance.

KEYWORDS

Assessment; school culture; assessment culture; high-performing schools; assessment and learning

Introduction

A school's assessment culture is influenced by systemic and individual epistemologies in which the school is situated (Fuller & Skidmore, 2014). While assessment is widely recognised as influencing teaching and learning (Baird et al., 2017), prevailing epistemologies can affect what is regarded as effective teaching, assessing and learning. Sahlberg (2010) identified that the sociocultural context of a school can create positive circumstances supporting learning, but that this can be impeded by 'current market-oriented education policies – especially test-based accountability ... [that] set external expectations to how teachers should teach and what students should learn in school' (p. 50). For example, a plethora of research points to a tension between assessment for learning improvement and assessment for accountability purposes (Cumming et al., 2019; Ozga, 2009; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2014). This tension is experienced most strongly by school leaders and classroom teachers as they work to meet systemic and community expectations which may appear contrary to their own beliefs and values about teaching, assessing and learning (Bonner, 2016; Tan, 2014).

The intersection of assessment for learning and accountability contexts is considered in this paper within contemporary complexities that promote creative responses to the functions and design of assessment, yet limit assessment practices through accountability

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requirements and historic expectations. The paper aims to examine how the social and cultural characteristics of a school can support risk-taking to trial assessment innovations that may be counter to historic and current trends.

Specifically, the study is located in a non-selective, independent girls' school catering for Years 7–12 (12–17 year-old students) in Queensland, Australia, and explores the introduction of a counter-cultural approach to assessment in the first year of secondary education. The analysis is sited in the practice of this high-performing school, which has a high socio-economic student cohort, indicating a relative level of socio-economic advantage. While much has been written about improving learning outcomes in communities with high levels of poverty (e.g., Preston et al., 2017; Singh, 2018), research exploring these tensions in high-performing schools in high socio-economic contexts is limited, yet it is important to understand the unique circumstances of these schools and what can be learnt about innovative assessment practices from their reform experiences.

The project involved teachers trialling, discussing and reflecting on their practice within and across Faculties over two years. In the first year of the project, historical practices of summative assessment continued to be privileged alongside new ways of working. Thus, the first year focussed on teachers noticing learning with some initial trialling of formative, feedback-only assessments. The second year involved a greater focus on feedback-only assessments and no reported grades. The intended outcome was to shift the focus from assessment to learning. It was anticipated that this shift would best prepare students for subsequent Senior assessment practices through developing capacity to monitor, and take ownership of, their learning. This shift could be considered counter-cultural in a context where Queensland was preparing for the first time in almost 50 years to introduce external assessments in the Senior years. It might also be seen as counter-cultural in a context where students in Year 7 participate in national literacy and numeracy testing. Within this context, we address the research question:

What are the social and cultural conditions that need to coalesce to operationalise a counter-cultural response to assessment practices that privilege learning over assessing?

The paper contributes to the field by conceptualising and providing evidence of the operationalisation of a counter-cultural response to the introduction of new state assessment policy. It is written in three parts. First, literature regarding attributes of high-performing school cultures is synthesised and the theoretical framework introduced. Second, the research context, design and analytic lens to examine multiple influences on school decision-making are presented. Third, research findings are presented and discussed in terms of the intersection of practices that enabled the school leadership to take risks and introduce a counter-cultural approach to assessment in the Junior school.

Culture, leadership and high-performing schools

Recent studies that have explored culture, academic performance and leadership in high-performing schools have considered aspects such as the relationship between core values of a school and organisational structures that are operationalised (Armstrong et al., 2018), components of a 'strong school culture' that sustain improvement (Lee & Louis, 2019; Preston et al., 2017), and purposeful, progressive and strategic use of new policies as

opportunities to regenerate practice while sustaining high performance (Gu et al., 2018). In the project by Armstrong et al. (2018), secondary school leaders in England and Hong Kong utilised complex strategies developed over time to navigate between policy demands while upholding the values and priorities inherent in their school cultures. This practice was described as policy being 'absorbed' through layered responses, dispersed leadership, trust, and explicit connections between school structures and values. Discussing different perspectives and willingness to share knowledge and expertise were identified as stimulating new or alternative ways of problem solving in schools (Armstrong et al., 2018; Gu et al., 2018) and among schools (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). For example, Gu et al.'s (2018) mixed-methods study of how and why secondary school leaders were achieving and sustaining high performance found shared understandings embedded in everyday school practices and being garnered to renew practice.

Other research identified that effective leaders are aware of how, and when, to connect, disconnect or reconnect school structural, cultural and relational elements when navigating new ways of working (Walker, 2012), while remaining cognisant of constraints and challenges in the context of practice (Tan, 2014). For example, while academic success is important, so too are students' well-being and skills for future learning (Hopfenbeck, 2017; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015). Achieving balance involved identifying and maintaining focus on purpose, and convincing others to enact this purpose through knowing how to connect the new and the old.

Concomitantly, teachers require assurance that they are trusted to take risks in their work (James, 2005). In the high performing and high accountability context of Singaporean secondary education, Fulmer et al. (2019) found in a period of assessment change 'teachers experience tension between the demands of conventional high-stakes examinations and the impetus for alternative assessments' (p. 179). Competing and conflicting messages about assessment received by teachers from educational stakeholders, including the media, parents, school leaders and students, caused tension regarding the purposes and practices of assessment. The authors recommended further research into the relationship between teachers' conceptions of assessment, professional learning about assessment and their willingness to implement novel assessments.

This challenge was partly addressed in research by Lee and Louis (2019) who explored changing school cultures in the U.S. They identified the complexity of 'implementing innovative ideas for teachers, leaders, and curriculum into practice' as 'reculturing schools' rather than restructuring (p. 92). They characterised strong performing school cultures as having high academic expectations, provision of student support as needed, trust and respect within school staff, optimism, and a professional learning community with 'shared responsibility, reflective dialogue, deprivatized practice, and organizational learning' (p. 91). Similarly, Preston et al.'s (2017) literature review of the components of effective high schools for improving learning for disadvantaged students identified the need for leaders who 'seed' the desired culture. Eight components emerged from their review, including the importance of learning-centred leadership, personalised learning connections, and a culture of learning and professional behaviour focused on teacher collaborative learning and responsibility. Other research has also identified the power of teachers' collaborative discussion to address problems of enacting effective assessment (e.g., Siegel et al., 2019), with teachers meeting across secondary school subject departments attributed to developing supportive professional cultures (James, 2005).

However, the notion of an 'outstanding' school has also been aligned with performance when linked to high-stakes, test-based accountability in which schools and teachers focus on test results rather than student learning (Ball, 2013). A study by Clapham et al. (2016) concerning English state secondary education highlighted the close connection between producing high-performance outcomes with the expectation and accountability to sustain this level of performance. For schools, the connection between performance reputation, enrolments and, in cases of private sector schools, sources of funding, are inextricably related to test-based accountability. Such accountability has been described as pressing school leaders and teachers to act in ways (for example, focussing only on test scores) that may be counter to other more altruistic values of education and broader educative purposes (Sahlberg, 2010). Within this context, leadership is often viewed in opposition to teachers with required impact measures of student learning restricted to a narrow set of indicators.

In the Singaporean education system, notable for outstanding educational performance, work is underway to address tension between high expectations for performance on official examinations, and development of sustainable practices linked to understanding oneself as a learner (Leong & Tan, 2014). In a 'balanced' assessment system, Leong and Tan suggest that assessment systems: (1) aim for high consequential validity that positively influences student learning rather than distracts or discourages students from learning; (2) provide a balance between 'quantitative measurements and aggregations of learning' (p. 610) and ipsative measures of personal growth and development; and (3) focus on short-term and long-term learning goals. In making this final point, Leong and Tan (2014) stress that 'it is increasingly important to reconsider the effects of assessment on each student's long-term future learning capacity' (p. 611). Here, they draw on Boud's (2000) concept of sustainable assessment for meeting present learning needs while preparing students with future skills. Leong and Tan state that this involves teaching students to self-assess and self-regulate their learning with the aim of 'decreasing the adverse impact of high-stakes assessment on their future learning capacity' (p. 611). Similarly, undergraduate students' adaptive beliefs about assessment were found to be associated with their self-regulated responses to assessment (Cho et al., 2020). However, balanced assessment has also been recognised as a challenging goal to attain, especially in secondary school contexts where summative assessment is prioritised (Deneen et al., 2019).

The paper adds to this discussion by considering the context of a school that was, in many respects, 'absorbing' policy (Armstrong et al., 2018) to introduce a way of working based on their beliefs but new to the school's assessment culture, that is, a 'reculturing' of their assessment practices was set in train (Fullan, 2016; Lee & Louis, 2019). The findings are likely to be relevant to other schools internationally operating in a context of high test-based accountability, risk management and aversion, but with growing concerns about student well-being while remaining market competitive.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, assessment is viewed as social practice and understood within social, cultural, economic, political and historical contexts of its occurrence (Elwood & Murphy, 2015). Assessment practice is thus embedded within particular cultural beliefs which legitimise particular routines, behaviours and activities. Assessment culture is perceived

to be influenced by historic notions or cultural scripts of assessment as well as by individuals' perception of themselves as performing within these cultures (Willis et al., 2013). Invariably, the whole school community – leaders, teachers, students, parents and school boards or councils – has a stake in assessment practices and outcomes. Sociocultural theory identifies the importance of understanding each of these perspectives as they influence a school's assessment culture. Sociocultural theory also highlights the difficulty in disrupting established and deeply entrenched notions of what assessment is and should look like; and the roles of participants in this practice.

Context

As is the case in many educational jurisdictions internationally, Australian education has been impacted by programmes that measure and compare attainment, with concerns raised in policy and media discourse about teacher quality and falling standards. For example, in 2008, Australia introduced the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) as a means to monitor and compare educational achievement across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in all schools on national literacy and numeracy census tests. In addition, the Australian Government launched the MySchool website in 2010 – a resource designed to make educational comparisons across schools and states publicly accessible, and facilitate a putative parental desire to inform school choice. Information from NAPLAN and MySchool is used by the media to produce league tables that contribute to comparisons between schools and an associated competitive and measurement culture. Research has indicated that time spent drilling and preparing students for these assessments has disrupted curriculum in some schools significantly, weakening subject-based learning experiences (Cumming et al., 2018; Lingard et al., 2016). NAPLAN data are also an easy measure with which to judge school leaders and teachers using key performance indicators. In efforts to achieve appropriate metrics on NAPLAN, Hardy (2015) suggested that schooling has been “increasingly characterised by an “economy of numbers” rather than an “economy of learning”” (p. 359) which has weakened bold educational thinking at the school level.

In addition, a new model of Senior Secondary assessment, which introduced a dual system of an external common assessment and three heavily regulated school-based assessments for each subject, was implemented in Queensland schools in 2019 (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority [QCAA], n.d.a). This represented a radical shift in Queensland secondary schooling which for the past almost fifty years has been a system of school-based moderated assessment (QCAA, n.d.b). Responses from Queensland schools to this new assessment system have varied with anecdotal evidence suggesting that some schools will introduce the Senior assessment types into Junior secondary years as preparation, potentially restricting learning to that valued within those assessment types.

As previously stated, the research context was a highly prestigious and high-achieving independent girls' school in Queensland, Australia with a national reputation for educational excellence in both curricular and co-curricular activities (McWilliam, 2013). The school's operation is based on the articulation of a broad-based liberal education, a philosophical positioning in place since the school's inception (McWilliam, 2013). In 2015, a review into Queensland Senior Secondary Schooling

(Matters & Masters, 2014) and the resultant Queensland Government response (2014), impelled the school to conduct their own review of their assessment culture and related practices.

The school's review revealed a heavy assessment load in Year 7 with much of the assessment occurring at the end of each term. This resulted in 'assessment bottlenecks', which were limiting teaching and learning time and causing stress for teachers and students. Three competing, yet interrelated, agendas were identified: (1) to maintain a focus on high performance through testing, measurement and comparison; (2) to shift the focus to formative assessment; and (3) to reduce student anxiety associated with assessment. The decision was made by school leaders to trial a shift from a highly regimented Year 7 assessment culture to focus on learning. The assessment types would not be restricted to the four Senior assessment types chosen for each discipline in the school (QCAA, n.d.a). Through ongoing professional development sessions aimed to provoke thinking about teaching, learning and assessment, school leaders with a group of Year 7 English, mathematics, science and humanities teachers initiated a trial of a system to remix the amount of formal assessment and the traditional reporting of grades. The aims of this change in Year 7 assessment culture were to focus students' thinking on their learning, establish habits of self-assessment, goal-setting, and creativity, and reduce test-related student anxiety before the introduction of more intense Senior assessment regimes.

Methods

To understand systemic and cultural change in education, it has been suggested that researchers 'get close to what happens in classrooms and school cultures' (Fullan, 2006, p. 6), and focus on interactions within individual and social spaces of educational decision-making (Eacott, 2010). This study involved an in-depth investigation of one high-performing school conducted over two years, 2017–2018. It employed a mixed-method research design with three iterative phases. Phase one involved collecting data to understand the current influences on the school assessment culture through surveys of students' and parents' conceptions of assessment, interviews with school leaders, and participant observation of meetings with teachers. These data provided information on participant perspectives of changing assessment practices. Phase two involved data collection in classrooms and from teacher professional learning meetings as teachers discussed their different approaches to collecting evidence of learning, the student role in these processes, and the impact of these different approaches to assessment on their work and teaching practices. Phase three repeated the collection of data through the student and parent surveys, and interviews with school leaders, and a final teacher meeting. The focus of this final phase was to determine the impact of the changes in Year 7 assessment practices from different perspectives.

The evidence reported in this paper is based on interviews with school leaders (defined as those involved in leading learning within the school in discipline-specific and general ways); professional learning group meetings with participating Year 7 teachers conducted across two years; and parent survey responses collected at the beginning and end of each school year.

Interviews with school leaders: Two audio-recorded semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 minutes were conducted at the beginning and end of the project

with six school leaders inclusive of the Academic Directors of Mathematics, Science, Humanities and English Faculties, the Curriculum Director, and a Deputy Principal (n = 12 interviews). The purpose of the interviews was to develop a sense of how school leaders viewed assessment and connect this to the school's assessment culture. This perspective is important as research has repeatedly shown the influence of leadership on school culture.

Professional learning group meetings: Twelve meetings were conducted across the two years of the study, with the purpose to promote collaborative thinking about effective assessment and evidence of improved student learning. This focus aligned with Doğan and Adams' (2018) finding that identified this purpose within effective learning groups for teachers. In 2017, meetings were held once a term; this increased to twice a term in 2018. Meetings involved teachers sharing their planning and teaching strategies and resources for collecting evidence of learning and promoting student agency, as well as stimuli to promote discussion. Data included meeting notes, artefacts used in and developed from meetings, and an audio recording from the final meeting.

Parent survey: Parents (n = 286) of Year 7 students completed an open-response, on-line survey regarding their conceptions of assessment, their beliefs regarding how assessment should be conducted, and their perspectives of the school's assessment practices at the beginning and at the end of each year. These perspectives were gathered to determine alignment with the school's assessment culture and the extent of variation within parental views. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Analysis

Each data set was transcribed and thematically analysed by at least two researchers focussing on conceptions of assessment, students' role in assessment, and expectations of the school. This first layer of content analysis included word frequency counts, the generation of word trees to identify textual context and thematic analysis. These methods were combined to avoid a biased interpretation of the data and to encourage the researchers to continually question what they were seeing in the text. The themes for each participant group were derived and recorded in comparative tables with supporting text segments to identify commonalities and differences in participant descriptions of their experiences and conceptions. For example, the transcripts and notes from the teachers' meetings were categorised under their initial responses and identified issues with the suggested changes, and also their final responses and further considerations for new assessment practices. These headings were sub-categorised according to comments on enacted and ideal assessment practices and teacher observations of student responses to these new practices. Concept maps of the core themes were created to identify connections, agreements and disagreements across the data sets. At this stage, the focus was on identifying common terms/phrases used to describe assessment and common expectations of assessment practices, and where there were points of difference. For example, common terms frequently used by all groups included: thinking, learning, student needs, feedback, fairness and informing teaching. As previously discussed by Armstrong et al. (2018), Gu et al. (2018), and Fullan (2016), reculturing of school practices starts with the shared understandings and priorities of the whole school. These were identified as the points from which a new assessment culture might be 'absorbed' amid

possible areas of tension. Further analysis of how these terms were being used by the three groups of participants led to the grouping of ideas into two overarching themes of shared priorities.

Results

The collated data revealed a school assessment culture in the midst of change. Two core and interconnected themes were apparent across the data sets: (1) a shared goal for exceptional student scholarship and innovative teaching practices through a focus on learning; and (2) the connection of summative assessment with a formative purpose. While these themes are of themselves not original, we propose that it is the promotion and ownership of a shared vision that also connects to student wellbeing, as well as the focussed attention on how to operationalise the new assessment culture, which can lead to uptake. The themes overlap and coalesce with an underlying critical aim to address student anxiety associated with assessment load and outcomes.

A shared goal for exceptional student scholarship and innovative teaching practice through a focus on learning

The first theme is summarised as the purposeful creation of a vibrant learning culture that stretched the boundaries of quality teaching, learning and thinking. Interviews with the leadership team identified the influence of key educational scholars in their thinking about assessment. How leaders spoke about assessment was then reflected in teacher talk and parent responses as a shared language across the school.

First, the school has a long-term commitment of engaging with research of leading education scholars to continually challenge their thinking and pedagogical practices. Prior to the Year 7 assessment project, school leaders and teachers had attended presentations and collaboratively studied work of scholars such as William (2011), Stobart (2014), and Hattie (2009). **Box 1** provides an illustrative example, based on an interview with the Humanities Academic Director, of the rich background of experiences informing scholarship and practices at the school, resultant strategies being developed, and an outcome of the new assessment practices.

Box 1. Illustrative example of school leadership to promote innovative practice (Humanities Academic Director, 2018).

Promoting innovative assessment practice

Background: I had the privilege of doing some work with Dylan William ... [My ideas] came from his premise that teaching and learning are not linear ... Work[ing] with the class where you can elicit understanding in ways that are creative is really, really important.

Strategies to achieve this goal: You have to have professional learning communities with your team to actually see if we've got some sort of common narrative in terms of that learning experience. ... What is the thing that matters the most? ... We removed the idea of a test entirely ... We created a whole new way of learning and a whole new way of assessing that learning ... you have to know your class ... [Through technology] we could see where children were up to without necessarily going around and actually invading their learning space.

The outcome: What amazed me more than anything else was that students actually took over the task of enquiry learning. ... The task actually created a whole new way of learning that we hadn't expected that experience to be.

The culture of high scholarship included an expectation by academic directors that teachers, drawing on pertinent research and through provocations taken from the work of international scholars, would engage in lively debate regarding effective teaching, learning and assessing. This included designing assessments of key concepts connected to real world learning. In this space, teachers were both challenged and supported to extend their pedagogical expertise, and to think with a sense of ‘possibility’ (Humanities Academic Director, 2018). A humanities teacher described a shift in assessment design from factual recount to engagement in local and world issues of importance: ‘We used to have a “water in the world” test which was really just rote learning ... in meetings, we decided that’s not what we wanted. It wasn’t really promoting learning about the water in the world’. Teachers also reported a shift in students’ association of class activities with assessment. While students initially asked whether they were going to be assessed on class work, this questioning abated over each year. Regardless of grades not being awarded, students remained highly engaged, producing deeper and more creative responses than tasks required, and able to ‘identify a great number of things that they learnt’ (Humanities teacher, 2018).

Second, the foundation of a shared language of learning was structurally embedded in Faculties. The talk of school leaders associated the purpose of assessment with learning rather than the receipt of a grade, particularly for students in the Junior years (Box 2).

Box 2. Illustrative comments by school leaders (2018) showing the connection being made between learning and assessment.

Connecting learning and assessment

Humanities Academic Director: Assessment is actually about the *learning experience*, not about the learning outcome ... the opportunity to dig up new ways of *noticing the learning* that’s taking place in your classroom.

Mathematics Academic Director: ... trying to say to them [students] look you’re not reviewing for the assessment; you’re *reviewing for your learning*.

Curriculum Director: ... staff realising that if you remove summative assessment at the end of a certain time period, then students behave differently in that the focus is more on their *learning* rather than on the piece of assessment ... You can have all sorts of other ways of *recognising their learning* and the students become less dependent on you; they become more open to thinking about ways in which they can do things. They tend to compete more against themselves and their past performance than against each other because they know that there are no grades involved.

Teachers affirmed a reframing of language used with students, which was articulated by an English teacher as, ‘very careful talk about learning and them developing an idea of what’s next for them and creating a culture of personal best’. Teachers discussed increased classroom dialogue regarding assessment criteria so that students knew the expectations for their learning and the required quality of work. Another teacher identified that ‘the girls could really focus on the learning and they were not having to worry about the pressure of getting an attainment grade whereas we were still gathering information that we could use to make informed decisions about school classes and other things that come out the back of assessment usually’. This required teachers to develop skills of noticing learning and promoting assessment as ipsative, while developing students’ skills to self-assess. Parents described the role of assessment using phrases

such as 'expand learning through own initiative' and using 'concepts and skills to acquire further learning'.

Though in early stages, the new assessment practices and explicit focus on learning were observed to be positively affecting the adjustment of Year 7 students to the expectations of secondary education and the culture and context of the school. One teacher spoke of this as giving 'girls a chance to settle and to get used to our system and our approach and learn to do things a little bit differently and then get a grade once they're a lot more comfortable and had already started to improve'. Teachers were affirmative of changes to the Year 7 assessment culture, since it provided students with space to deal with one level of anxiety first – settling into a new school – and then with the assessment demands of secondary education: 'last year, when they came in Year 7, we bombarded them, the very first thing [assessment] that they did was massive ... It was too much for them'. The Humanities Academic Director explained that there had been 'no negative feedback [from parents] at all. I think parents become increasingly aware that, very early on, these students take on a lot and have high expectations of themselves'.

However, there was also discomfort for teachers and students with the changing assessment practices and associated pedagogies. For example, in mathematics, students could choose the level of challenge when presented with problems and whether to ask for a prompt. Some students were reported as responding with statements of 'just tell me what to do and I'll do it', and some teachers 'found it a challenge as well because it is uncomfortable to go "no, no, no, you have a little think about it", that kind of pedagogy and pedagogical change' (Mathematics Academic Director, 2018). One teacher reflected that 'the girls don't accept responsibility – or some of them, probably more than half – really don't accept responsibility for their own learning'. Yet there was general consensus among school leaders and teachers that Year 7 was the time to introduce such skills formatively without time pressure, encouraging students to 'find the edge of your learning ... your growth spot' (Mathematics Academic Director, 2018), and 'to really help them [students] understand that what's important is them learning how to learn and actually everything is important in its own right and builds a foundation for what they'll do later' (Teacher, 2018). The talk of school leaders, teachers and parents established a common focus on enabling students to understand themselves as learners. Leaders and teachers identified teaching of specific skills and providing time for adjustments to secondary school pedagogies and assessment practices. Teachers acknowledged moving through periods of discomfort to purposefully 'notice' learning.

The connection of summative assessment with a formative purpose

The second theme recognised the cultural embeddedness of assessment practices and the difficulty in changing historical notions of assessment purposes and practices. While school leaders and teachers may have envisioned a radically different assessment system, they remained grounded in their accountability to their community and the economic rationality of the power of public-facing assessment results. The practice of not providing a summative grade in some terms was spoken of alongside the connection of formative and summative assessment purposes, in particular through development of students' skills to self-assess, and the identification and sequential development of learning about assessment in discipline-specific ways. Apparent in the talk of all participant groups was

strengthening this connection for long-term capacity building and to assist students to manage assessment-related stress.

First, there was a theme of student ownership of their assessment results through developing skills of self-assessment and goal setting. The Mathematics Academic Director stated, 'We're trying very much to put that ownership back onto the girls to say you can do something about this and the exam is just a tool to help you discern what you have to do next'. This strategy involved disconnecting identity from grades, 'If you're an A, do you become complacent because "I've already ascertained I'm an A". If you're a C, is that you for life? ... for us to be able to get rid of them [grades] and say ... all a number is saying is proportionately how much of the recent work has made sense to you and how much growth have you got in terms of go away, do a bit more, ask more questions ... I think this will also help us in our journey because we'll be able to just focus them away from a grade' (Mathematics Academic Director, 2018). The English Academic Director (2018) made a similar point, stating, 'We all know from Dylan Wiliam's studies ... that as soon as any kind of a grade appears alongside more useful feedback, the more useful feedback fades into the less useful background'; with the Curriculum Director connecting formative feedback with learning and understanding summative assessment, 'We see in the younger years that it's very important that students focus on their learning ... and understand how assessment works, but not necessarily with the impact that grades can have on that'.

The leaders' intent to reduce summative grades and focus on formative practices was iterated in teachers' comments for students 'to understand themselves as learners and focus on identifying what they can do well and what they need to fix themselves, developing across the years' (Teacher, 2018). Parent open-ended survey responses also linked assessment with ongoing feedback that informed learning and developed lifelong critical and creative thinking skills. Although parental comments identified the summative purpose of assessment to 'see how much the students have learnt', this was balanced in their comments to include a formative purpose to 'provide feedback to the students ... to be used as a tool in learning'. **Box 3** illustrates the actual work to connect formative and summative assessment in the English Faculty.

Box 3. Illustrative example of connected formative assessment strategy in the English Faculty (English Academic Director, interview, 2018).

Connecting formative and summative assessment practices

Context: To reduce anxiety surrounding oral assessments, the decision was made that students submit their written presentation for their oral assessment several days before the presentation: "The difference it's made in the calmness and the confidence has been quite profound".

Parents' formative role: Based on feedback from parents and students, the English Faculty introduced more specific guidelines for parents regarding how to support their daughter at home in their preparation for an oral presentation: "The girls go home and they say to their mum and dad or big sister the only thing you're allowed to talk to me about tonight is how long it is. And then the next night ... the only thing you're allowed to give me feedback on is my structure and organisation ... The feedback from parents and girls is that parents feel more confident in giving feedback because they've been told what to look for".

Peer assessment: "... the speaker will speak for two minutes, each girl will then sit in silence and write down their feedback on a very particular aspect of what the speaker did, and then in the next minute the three or four girls who provided feedback will confer and come up with a top five list of things the speaker could do to do better next week when they do the real thing ... the security of conferring with their fellow peer feedbackers gave them the confidence to give quite constructive feedback rather than the hollow praise that we sometimes get."

The Curriculum Director identified skills students needed to self-assess their work including ‘analysing their own work in terms of being able to focus on what they still need to learn and which components they need to learn ... to break down topics of work into little bits ... to structure their time ... to kind of look at themselves and see how they’re feeling about things’. These strategies connected students’ assessment skills, ownership of their learning, and management of assessment stress and anxiety. The strategies were apparent in teacher talk as a ‘shift ... towards long-term capacity building – this is how you think, which will pay off in countless ways’; ‘help[ing students] learn to manage stress and be able to self-assess and do something about it ... because I think we often roll from test to test without really having enough time to really learn how to deal with that kind of feedback’. Aligning with the leaders’ talk, teachers connected explicit teaching of self-assessment with managing stress as preparation for future summative assessment practices.

Second, was shared recognition of the need for discipline-specific assessment skills (for example, mathematical study skills, or an enquiry mindset in humanities), rather than a common template across the school. For example, a goal to develop effective study skills for mathematics is discussed by the Mathematics Academic Director as the impetus for change in Year 7 assessment practices (Box 4). While formative feedback through small quizzes without a grade was provided in semester 1, formal assessment was introduced in semester 2.

Box 4. Illustrative example of school leadership to promote innovative practice: Mathematics Academic Director (2018)

Developing discipline-specific skills in assessment

Background: ... it was through some reading and ideas that I came across. Trying to reduce some anxiety and the realisation that these students come to us and they have no idea how to study ... and then all of a sudden they come to Year 7 we say right here’s an exam and expect them to know what to do with it ... we’re trying to encourage regular review and to be discerning about information either that they’ve absorbed or haven’t absorbed ...

Strategies to achieve this goal: ... in the latter part of Year 7 we introduced more formal testing, only one term’s worth of work but we are encouraging them to write study notes ... and it’s totally up to them what they put on it. They can write language on there, they can write a little example of something they found difficult, you know, ‘this is what you do when ...’ Whatever they think will support them. Because that’s really what we should be doing when we’re trying to do an aid memoir to ourselves, no matter what our kind of subject is ... They submit these a week before the exam. They are then given back to them during the test. That’s what they can use to support them in the test ... The idea of them giving it in the week before was to try and get them away from the notion that you can study in a week before the exam. It’s a case of whatever is not on the notes the week before the exam, you don’t get ... We’re trying to get them to be prepared. Because we really want them to go away from this, ‘if I just bust a gut for 48 hours before the exam, I’ll nail it’ ... Our subject doesn’t work like that. For you to really develop those deep concepts and make links with other things, bits of information that are going on, you’ve got to be ruminating about this for some time.

The outcome: ... it’s the start of our journey and I think there’s a lot of conversation to be had but I think we’ve started ... parents want to know about the grade ... It’s going to take time for them to get used to, you can’t just pull the rug and say there’s no more A, B and Cs, and now you’ve got this ... I wouldn’t dream of saying that all teachers are in the same place at the moment.

In this example, students were encouraged to write study notes during class which were peer assessed for accuracy and to share ideas regarding effective note-taking. Teachers though did not always initially agree with the path presented by leaders; one mathematics teacher stated, ‘I was dead against it’. However, to enable leaders’ visions for

new Junior school assessment practices there needed to be trust in the leadership. The mathematics teacher complied with the request, and at the end of the year stated, 'now I think it's a practice I'll keep because I think there's value'. This teacher described how students chose whether they referred to their notes in the test, and the reduced test anxiety related to developing a habit of revision that focussed on identified areas of learning need.

Teachers described not having a graded assessment as initially 'really fascinating', but also being 'sceptical' and 'a little bit frightened', particularly in relation to their historic reliance on a grade for commenting on student performance and for making decisions regarding end-of-year academic prizes. Indeed, all school leaders and teachers viewed existing school structures related to Year 7 end-of-year academic prizes as hindering attempts to change the assessment culture. Teachers also raised concerns about sustaining the learning mindset of the new assessment culture as students progressed towards Senior years' summative assessment practices.

However, at least in Year 7, the absence of a grade did not appear to impact on student work ethic or enthusiasm for learning. Class observations and teacher focus group comments showed that students continued to work hard and produce creative responses to tasks, often beyond the expectation of their teachers. For example, at the end of 2018, one teacher identified that students 'still put a lot of time and effort' into the culminating presentation of work. This was considered to be due to 'valuing ... students being able to understand themselves as learners and focusing on identifying what they can do well and what they need to fix themselves'. Within these practices, students were still developing a 'product' of their learning, establishing learning goals and collectively and individually reflecting on their progress.

Discussion

From this research, we found that changing assessment culture and attending to student assessment-related anxiety within performative and summative assessment contexts involved complex cultural leadership work to operationalise new practices with teacher, parent and student buy-in. Elements of this cultural change included developing self-directed learners, students' capacity to self-assess, the instantiation of a common vocabulary to focus on learning, removal of grades, teachers 'noticing' learning, and all groups seeing the possibility of the assessment initiatives for future success in learning. As the findings show, there was not one single strategy that teachers were required to implement, rather the shift occurred culturally through the gradual introduction of a range of discipline-specific strategies generated by the teachers that were focussed on learning how to learn, and opportunities to share ideas and concerns as a school community.

In a performative era of test-based accountability, where there is much emphasis on a school's assessment results, it is very difficult for school leaders and teachers to take risks around assessment. Even in an environment in which counter-culturalism is encouraged, contagion from historical cultural scripts of assessment and their manipulation by political and media elites makes counter-cultural reform difficult for school leaders and teachers. This study investigated a school with historically high social and academic standing (McWilliam, 2013). Parents have chosen to access the academic capital achieved within

the cultural transmissions of the school, and their daughters, in the main, come to the school with an expectation of working hard for high achievement outcomes. The focus of this discussion is on the collective practices of the school to understand the impact on individual actions, while not obscuring the contradictions and independent agencies of teachers, parents, students and school leaders, nor homogenise the individuals who make up the school.

Avoiding risk has been described as a feature of today's schools, 'risk of a poor inspection, poor exam results, poor league table rankings, negative parental attention, bad press in the media' (Page, 2017, p. 2), which can lead to managerial processes that 'efficiently maximise the major output of student achievement' (Skourdombis, 2019, pp. 14–15). Arguably, a focus on performance can shift the gaze away from deep and meaningful learning to a reproduction of facts and formulas (Sahlberg, 2010). Yet many school communities in today's performative era are desensitised to the dominant cultural practices of assessment and the associated objectification of learning as results and qualifications.

The school in this study made a firm decision to focus on learning and not on assessment results. While there would not be a school who would not claim to focus on learning, the difference in this case was the acknowledgement by the school that an authentic focus on learning required collaborative thinking about assessment and pedagogy, willingness to have their thinking challenged, and commitment to introduce potentially risky practices that might have been counter-cultural to popular epistemologies of assessment.

Three interrelated key learnings relevant to other schools arose from this study: (1) 'reculturing' of assessment practices occurs over time and requires evidence of effectiveness; (2) the rationalities of summative assessment can work alongside that of learning through a collaborative focus on what it means to operationalise learning; and (3) de-emphasising summative assessment and grades by foregrounding formative assessment and learning in the Junior years can address student well-being. First, the new version of Year 7 assessment practices envisioned by school leaders challenged the hitherto dominant cultural scripts of assessment. To gain status as legitimate Year 7 assessment practice, there needed to be trust in leadership and evidence of learning. The legitimacy of the practice was critically linked to students' learning assessment skills needed for success in new Senior years' assessment, including an external component (see Leong & Tan, 2014). This first point responds to the challenge of Deneen et al. (2019) that in secondary school contexts which prioritise summative assessment, balanced assessment can be achieved, at least in the Junior years.

Second, rationalities of summative assessment can work alongside that of learning through a collaborative focus on what it means to operationalise learning. The school's focus remained on improving test results without the reductive rationality that would have limited Junior school assessment practices to the new Senior assessment model. Rather, the leadership chose to focus on teaching Year 7 students skills to self-monitor and understand themselves as learners who would be able to adjust their work 'during the act of production itself' (Sadler, 1989, p. 121). The work of the school leaders was to maintain excellence in standardised test scores and other assessments addressing the accountability mechanisms driving school practices, while leading the critical examination of school assessment practices. Through collective thinking that confronted the rationalities of test preparation and their impact on curriculum and pedagogy, and consistent messaging, strategies that foregrounded learning were assimilated as Year 7 assessment culture.

It can be argued that, because of the school's status as high achieving, it is easier to take risks and introduce new practices that include a greater focus on the creative and social purposes of schooling. On the other hand, market accountabilities to maintain academic standing in publicised test outcomes (for example, NAPLAN, Senior results) and to maintain status as a highly sought option in a competitive school market, can compel a school to stay within a test-centric rationality that restricts curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in reductive ways. One way or another, a counter-cultural decision imposes risks school leaders must take, highlighting the complex cultural leadership work required to integrate a new formative assessment policy alongside summative assessment practices upstream in the schooling of students.

Third, the study has shown how de-emphasising summative assessment and grades by foregrounding learning in Year 7 resulted in a depth of learning that surprised teachers, and addressed a common desire among school leaders, teachers, and parents to reduce assessment-related anxiety and promote student well-being. The importance of a consistent and common language linking assessment and learning, within both the school and home enabled uptake of a new assessment culture. Importantly, the promotion of this shared language occurred through engagement with research which stimulated the vision of school leaders and supported the negotiation of intended practice with teachers. Classroom practices that developed this culture included how teachers spoke of assessment and learning daily with their students, practices that aligned talk and actions, and the deliberate focus on learning and formative feedback over a reported grade. Teachers also used this language in communications with parents, and students took the language home in their conversations about learning. The alignment of the language used by the whole school community was fundamental to the progression to a new assessment culture.

Conclusion

Changing a school's assessment culture involves a complex interplay between competing epistemologies of assessment and learning. The research has demonstrated that reducing summative assessment so as to develop self-regulated learners who can successfully navigate formal summative assessment in later years presents a multi-faceted quandary that required visionary leadership and a school community willing to trial new practices. Change is fraught with risk, and the political implications of change cannot be ignored, particularly within a context of high social capital, as was the case in this study.

The necessity to be both accountable for assessment results and deliver a broad-based liberal education is an ongoing creative tension for school leaders. While continuing with historically effective, accepted and known processes has a certain level of stability and legitimacy, improved student outcomes often require quite radical changes to classroom practices (James, 2005). It is worthwhile noting here that in response to leaders' and teachers' concerns raised about Year 7 end-of-year academic prizes, the decision was made in 2019 to discontinue this practice with no negative feedback from parents or students. Quite often reform can be shut down through fear of risks and anticipated parent and community responses. This study supports other research, such as that by Armstrong and Ainscow (2018), of the importance for school leaders to consider the views of the school community to inform and gain acceptance for cultural change, particularly for historically legitimised practices such as assessment.

In a performative educational and assessment culture, school leadership teams need creative, yet informed and calculated responses aligned with a shared clear vision to mitigate risks associated with change and to ensure that the reform gains traction across the school community. The reform reported here was grounded in a strong research base that foregrounded learning in classroom assessment practices. This research-informed reform would seem to sit in stark contrast with the anecdotal evidence we have that some schools are utilising the new modes of Senior assessment in the Junior years, focusing on summative assessment rather than learning.

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