Assessment Without Judgment:

Effective Feedback Practices in the Classroom

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Abstract

From the time of Socrates the academic community has known that student learning is improved when students receive feedback about their work. More recently, researchers have determined that informative, specific feedback helps students improve by showing them the level at which they should aim to be performing and what immediate steps can help them get there. In 2010 Ontario introduced the policy Growing Success, which outlined assessment, evaluation and reporting requirements. This policy acknowledged the importance of descriptive feedback and encouraged teachers to provide it to their students. It has been noted that classroom teachers generally give very little quality feedback to their students and this project seeks to investigate what effective practices in terms of descriptive feedback can look like. Four Canadian educators were interviewed on the topics of assessment, descriptive feedback, and policy influences in the classroom, and the data were analyzed to find several common themes. These educators were all engaged in educational research and used evidence-based descriptive feedback techniques. Other similarities were a common concern about student motivation and the influence of grades on students’ learning. Descriptive feedback is a recommended part of classroom practice in Ontario and this study lends weight to the importance of feedback and a discussion of its implications in the classroom.
Acknowledgements

There are a number of people whom I would like to thank for their support over the past two years. First and foremost I would like to sincerely thank Donna Duplak, who has not only provided me with academic guidance in this project, but who has also acted as a sounding board for educational thoughts and has always been a caring, comforting, smiling face even during the stressful times. I would also like to thank the participants in my study. Each and every one of them is truly an inspiration and I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to speak with and learn from them. I want to thank Del Harnish for his ongoing support of my research. I marvel at his ability to answer my questions by provoking ten new ones. Finally, I would like to thank those that I have met at OISE over the past two years, and in particular my fellow JIs. In and out of class my instructors and peers have helped me shape my understanding of education and learning, and have contributed to who I am today as a researcher, educator, and person. Thank you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research Study

A shift has been made towards new pedagogies that place students at the centre of their learning, but unless assessment techniques are used that correspond with this instruction, students will be unable to benefit from the student-centred experience (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Recent assessment research has focused on assessment for learning and using formative assessment tools to support the learner’s development (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaborating in Education, 2006). Ongoing assessment for learning requires input from teachers and students in order to be successful, and for teachers one of the most important tasks is the provision of descriptive feedback to their students (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Wiliam & Thompson, 2008). Unfortunately, students typically receive very low-level feedback in the classroom (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998), and in many cases feedback is directed at the person (for example, “you’re smart”) rather than the task (for example, “that is correct”; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In Ontario, a recent publication by the Ministry of Education, Growing Success (2010), outlines assessment, evaluation and reporting guidelines for Ontario schools. The document introduced assessment for learning, as learning, and of learning as a new guiding framework for assessment and evaluation in Ontario. Since it is an important part of assessment for learning and as learning,
Growing Success explicitly stated, “teachers need to…give and receive specific and timely descriptive feedback” (pp. 28-29) on an ongoing basis to support student learning.

**Purpose of the Study**

The implementation of Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) commenced in September 2010 and it still remains unclear if assessment practices have changed to reflect these new guidelines. The provision of effective feedback is a difficult task and without understanding what feedback looks like in the classroom, teachers may have trouble implementing this Growing Success policy. The purpose of this study was to determine what descriptive feedback practices are currently taking place in classrooms and how they correspond with Growing Success and assessment literature.

The purpose of pedagogical research is to determine how to best support learners. In the case of assessment, decades of research have been able to inform the creation of Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), which represents the best assessment practices known to date. However, policies mean nothing until they are in practice. This investigation will help pedagogical researchers, policy-makers, and school administrators understand how new policy is received and implemented in educational settings. This study could also help Ontario teachers as a reflective tool when analyzing their feedback practices.
Research Questions

Main Research Question:

What can effective practices in terms of descriptive feedback, such as the feedback mandated by Growing Success, look like?

Sub-Questions:

• What are some common elements of effective descriptive feedback in the classroom?

• What is the role of evaluation vs. assessment in the classroom?

• Does effective feedback in the classroom correspond with what research tells us effective feedback should look like?

• What are some of the effects (for example, on student motivation and student achievement) of these practices in the classroom?

Background of the Researcher

My interest in assessment stems from my interest in student motivation. Children are innately curious, but based on what I have seen and experienced, this curiosity ebbs over the course of schooling so that by the time students enter high school they are seldom intrinsically motivated to learn. Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) tell us that when a student is rewarded for completing a task, their intrinsic motivation in the task is undermined, and to me it became clear that the practice of repeatedly rewarding students with grades must be detrimental to their intrinsic motivation.

In the Master of Teaching program I learned about 1) Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) Understanding by Design concept whereby assessment drives instruction in the classroom, and 2) Growing Success, which requires all Ontario
teachers to provide descriptive feedback to their students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Through this and other research, I began to appreciate that specific and timely written feedback can provide much more information than grades, and the competitive atmosphere created by grades is avoided. I loved the ideas that Growing Success promoted, but I found very little evidence of the policy being enacted in my practicum classrooms. When I had the opportunity to choose a research topic, I gravitated towards assessment because I am passionate about developing policies that, like Growing Success, promote authentic learning environments and intrinsic motivation in students.

**Overview**

Chapter One of this paper includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic of study. Chapter Two contains a review of the relevant literature on the topics of assessment and effective feedback. Chapter Three provides the methods and procedure that will be used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter Four of this paper contains the findings of the study, including themes that were found after data analysis. Chapter Five includes a discussion of the relevance and implications of these findings as well as future directions for further study. References and appendices follow at the end.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Student-Centred Learning and Motivation

Currently a shift is taking place in assessment policies to better align assessment with new process- and student-centred pedagogies (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Until recently, learning was thought to be a transmission-like process and educators believed that students passively received information from their instructors. Researchers now understand that learners actively construct their own knowledge and skills and that learning is an interactive process (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaborating in Education, 2006).

In a student-centred learning environment, student motivation has become an important topic of discussion; under what circumstances are students motivated to make their own meaning? Motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature (Dweck, 1986). Intrinsic motivation exists when the cause of goal-oriented activity is interest in the activity itself. Conversely, extrinsic motivation exists when the cause of goal-oriented activity is some sort of reward associated with accomplishing the goal. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are difficult to identify in students and are only generally measured based on observable indicators of the two motivational orientations. For example, students that are intrinsically motivated often set learning, mastery, or task-related goals, which orient students to expand their understanding or master a concept; these are compared to performance or ego-related goals, which are related to demonstrating ability through achievements and are more closely related to self-image then self-
efficacy (Ames, 1992; Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988). However, the question of motivation is more complicated than intrinsic is good and extrinsic bad.

According to Ryan and Deci’s (2000) framework of motivation (See Figure 1), the locus of the cause of goal-oriented activity can be internal while an individual is still extrinsically motivated. So motivating students becomes a question of what are they intrinsically interested in and secondarily, what academic goals do they have that will be rewarding for them to achieve (a situation of extrinsic motivation, but internal regulation).

**Figure 1. Types of motivation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Motivation</th>
<th>Amotivation</th>
<th>Extrinsic Motivation</th>
<th>Intrinsic Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Student thinks task is not relevant or they cannot do it</td>
<td>Students comply to get reward or avoid punishment</td>
<td>Students value activity and endorse its goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal (does not exist)</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Students want approval of others (ego involvement)</td>
<td>Students find the task inherently satisfying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 61

In a student-centred learning environment, students need to be able to adjust the strategies they use to make meaning throughout the learning process. Making these adjustments would require more information than a simple “correct” or “incorrect” judgment. Detailed information must be given to students about their performance at all times and simultaneously students need to be given the
tools to assess and regulate their own learning. To meet the needs of learners in student-centred environments, a new paradigm for assessment is needed (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaborating in Education, 2006).

**Growing Success**

In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a document that would guide assessment, evaluation and reporting in Ontario schools. *Growing Success* introduced Ontarians to the terms *assessment for learning, as learning, and of learning*, and outlined specific steps that teachers in Ontario must take to support their students’ learning. Among these seven steps is the provision of feedback: “teachers need to…give and receive specific and timely descriptive feedback about student learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 28-29).

**Classroom Assessment**

**The Role of Assessment**

Assessment has been a part of education for centuries, but its purpose and role has shifted over the years (Earl, 2003). Traditionally, assessment has been seen as the way by which a student’s worth as a learner is determined. However, over the years educators’ understanding of assessment has become more complex with different types of assessment introduced (i.e. diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment). Wiggins and McTighe (2005) in *Understanding by Design* put assessment centre-stage and used a framework which stressed “teaching for understanding” using “backwards planning”. Teachers using this framework follow three steps: 1) identify learning outcomes, 2) determine what assessment evidence could prove that students have reached
their goal, and 3) plan the learning experiences that will help students get to those goals. Wiggins and McTighe’s framework expanded the role of assessment and gave it a privileged position at the helm of all classroom learning. In this model, assessment drives instruction. Furthermore, recent research has indicated that progress towards mastery and high self-efficacy is a more efficient motivator than the feeling of failure associated with being compared to more successful peers (Fullen, 2011; Pajares, 2009). The role of assessment has been expanded and with that expansion new terminology has also arrived to help educators navigate this changing terrain.

**The New Language of Assessment**

According to *Growing Success*, the term *assessment* refers to “a set of actions undertaken by the teacher and student to gather information about student learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p.30). Once information is gathered it can be used for a variety of purposes. In new frameworks, assessments are classified by these purposes, resulting in three categories: *assessment for learning, assessment as learning*, and *assessment of learning*. In the past, assessments have been defined by the characteristics of the assessment tool (for example, a diagnostic assessment is one that takes place before a unit is started). However, more significant similarities and differences are seen when categorizing assessments by purpose (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010 Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaborating in Education, 2006). Table 1 summarizes the new framework, explaining the potential nature of each type of assessment and the uses of the resultant information.
Table 1. A Summary of Assessment Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of Assessment</th>
<th>Nature of Assessment</th>
<th>Use of Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment for learning</strong></td>
<td>• Makes use of diagnostic assessments, which take place before instruction, and • Formative assessments, which are conducted frequently and informally throughout instruction</td>
<td>• Students use diagnostic assessments to recall where they stand with respect to certain knowledge and skills • Diagnostic and formative assessments are used by teachers to plan instruction and assessment, and to track student progress towards learning goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment as learning</strong></td>
<td>• Makes use of formative assessment, providing ongoing, supported instruction and modeling</td>
<td>• Used by students to give feedback to their peers, reflect on their progress, set learning goals, and adjust learning strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of learning</strong></td>
<td>• Makes use of summative assessment that takes place at or near the end of learning</td>
<td>• Used by teachers to summarize and assign a value to represent the quality of student learning, which can be communicated to others (e.g. parents, teachers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p.31

*Assessment for Learning and as Learning*

*Assessment for learning* has multiple facets. Several authors (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2009, Ramaprasad, 1983) have identified frameworks to guide formative assessment (recall from Table 1 that formative assessment is used in both *assessment for learning* and *as learning*). Table 2 compares these formative assessment frameworks to one
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting Learning Targets and Success Criteria</td>
<td>1. Where am I going?</td>
<td>1. Identifying a reference level on the parameter in question</td>
<td>1. Clarifying learning intentions and criteria for success</td>
<td>Clarifying what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting Evidence of Learning</td>
<td>2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding</td>
<td>2. Providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance</td>
<td>Providing information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing Descriptive Feedback</td>
<td>2. Where am I now? 3. Where to next?</td>
<td>2. Reporting the actual level on the parameter in question</td>
<td>3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward</td>
<td>Delivering high quality information to students about their learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering Goal-Setting, Self-Assessment, and Self-Regulated Learning in Students</td>
<td>4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another</td>
<td>4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another</td>
<td>Encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning</td>
<td>5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning</td>
<td>Facilitating the development of self-assessment in learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Encouraging positive motivational beliefs</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
another and maps them on to assessment for learning and assessment as learning. Clearly, it can be agreed upon that assessment for learning has three major elements: setting learning targets, collecting evidence of learning, and providing feedback to the learner. We will spend some time looking at the role of feedback specifically in the learning process.

**Descriptive Feedback**

According to Growing Success, descriptive feedback, “helps students learn by providing them with precise information about what they are doing well, what needs improvement, and what specific steps they can take to improve” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 34). Several feedback models have been developed, and generally they follow the format of “Where am I now?” “Where to next?” (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Ramaprasad, 1983).

Feedback is a general term that in this context is tightly defined. Here I will take a moment to explore the features of the type of descriptive feedback that is recommended by researchers and mandated by Growing Success.

**Levels of Feedback**

In 1996, Kluger and DeNisi authored an influential report in feedback research; they conducted a large meta-analysis of feedback interventions, and used this data to inform a Feedback Intervention Theory. According to their Feedback Intervention Theory, there are three potential foci for attention when receiving feedback: task-learning processes (or attention to the information-level goals related to the task), task-motivation processes (or attention to goals related to the completion of the task, generally), and meta-task processes (or attention to
goals related to the self). Their meta-analysis indicated that feedback which directs focus to task-learning or task-motivation increases the effect of the feedback on student performance, whereas the effect of feedback is decreased when focus is directed to meta-task processes. Therefore, when a student’s goals are related to the completion of a task or learning related to a task they are much more receptive to feedback then when they are worried about protecting their ego.

Similarly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) developed an evidence-based model of effective feedback that has been widely cited in feedback and assessment literature over the past six years. According to this model, there are four levels to which feedback can be targeted: 1) task, 2) process, 3) self-regulation, and 4) self. Task feedback, such as “correct” or “incorrect” statements, is very important because it is the basis for learning in the process and self-regulation levels. However, too much feedback on this level can encourage students to focus on the immediate goal of producing accurate information, which could lead to a trial-and-error approach to their work. If this is the case, students will spend less time developing strategies to achieve their goals and monitoring their learning progress. About 90% of teacher questions target this level of feedback, which is problematic in an educational climate that values process over product, and student-centred over teacher-centred learning. Process level feedback provides information about student strategies, for example “this paper required more editing.” The process of a task may not be very visible based on the final product, but teachers may also be able to infer process information and provide comments in that way (Moss & Brookhart,
Self-regulation feedback can include suggestions of strategies that can help a student monitor their own progress in a task, for example, “when you have done your research, check that your information answers your research questions” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Appropriate feedback on process and self-regulation are powerful when paired because if students are able to create a plan and monitor their progress along the way then they are empowered to be active agents in their own learning. Finally, self-level feedback is feedback that, as mentioned above, directs attention towards meta-task processes, like the statement, “you’re really smart” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Since this type of feedback contains little information about the task and causes attention to be directed away from the task, towards the self, it is rarely helpful (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In the classroom, students often receive a lot of feedback at this level, when it would be more appropriately directed towards the task or process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Although the most common feedback is at the task and self levels in the classroom, feedback should progress up the hierarchy: initially, task feedback will be the most helpful, but moving towards process and then self-regulation feedback will challenge students to gradually take more ownership of their learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

**Features of Effective Feedback**

- **Content:** Feedback should explain how a student is performing with specific reference to learning goals, and it should explain how the student can close the gap between his or her work and the target outcome (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Ramaprasad, 1983).
• **Specificity:** Feedback should provide specific information about how the student needs to improve (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), but the feedback should not be so specific that errors cannot be corrected without student input (Moss & Brookhart, 2009).

• **Timing:** Generally, feedback should be given as promptly as possible. Feedback is most helpful to students when they are aware of the learning goals of a task and can act on the feedback that is given (Moss & Brookhart, 2009).

• **Focus:** Whether feedback should be positive or negative depends on the level at which the feedback is given, the student’s performance, and how the student views himself or herself (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Negative feedback can be a helpful tool when students have high self-efficacy, but is dangerous for students with less confidence (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

**Grades, Feedback, and Assessment of Learning**

Feedback, strictly speaking, can refer to any reactionary information, which in a school setting includes numerical grades that students are given on assignments and reports cards. However, grades are not descriptive feedback because they contain very little task information and target only the task level in Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) framework. Based on the information provided by grades, students do not know what next steps they can take to work towards their learning goal. Furthermore, grades only affect ego related attitudes, meaning students see them as a way to compare themselves to their peers,
without affecting attitudes or behaviours related to the task in any way (Butler, 1987). The only information that students retain from grades is a judgment of whether they did well or poorly, and not information about how they decrease the gap between their performance and the learning target. Typically grades are not used to support assessment for learning, but instead they are a part of assessment of learning.

Assessment of learning, also known as evaluation, measures what a student has learned over a certain period and usually takes place at the end of the learning process (Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaborating in Education, 2006). As mentioned above, the most commonly used communication tool in assessment of learning is grades. Grades are also generally the most salient type of assessment to students. For this reason they are sometimes used as a motivational tool in schools, but reports indicate that this practice undermines intrinsic motivation by encouraging students to focus on external reasons to learn (Deci, et al., 1999; Kohn, 1993). Using grades as rewards in school also decreases quality of learning and interferes with the development of self-regulation because students concerned about externally-decreed successes and failures are less likely to think creatively or be have confidence in their ability to self-assess (Benware & Deci, 1984; Shapira, 1976). Therefore, it is suggested that the use of assessment of learning and grades are kept to a minimum (Earl, 2003).

Figure 2 depicts the traditional balance of assessment in the classroom and proposes a new balance for assessment practices. In Figure 2.1. it is clear that evaluation is the driving force of the assessment program, whereas in Figure
2.2. *assessment of learning* takes up relatively little space. Instead, there is a large emphasis on *assessment for learning* and *as learning*. Striving towards the balance proposed in Figure 2.2. means that grades are relied on little and instead descriptive feedback and student self- and peer-assessment are the key means of communication between teachers and students.

In schools *assessment for learning* and *of learning* often overlap when students are given descriptive feedback beside numerical grades on assignments. The purpose of the comments is to help the student work towards the learning goals, and the grade is provided to show the student where he or she stands with reference to the provincial standard. However, when students
receive feedback together with numerical grades, they ignore the comments, nullifying the otherwise positive effect of descriptive feedback (Butler, 1988).

Assessment of learning allows teachers to communicate important information about student achievement to parents and other institutions. Evaluations that produce grades are relatively easy to construct and are consistent with what teachers, students, and parents expect to see from schools. However, there is little learning in the evaluation process so teachers must take care to not allow evaluation to dominate assessment or confound assessment of learning with assessment for learning.

**The Present Study**

Based on the above findings, it is clear that giving effective feedback is a complicated and variable process. According to Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) Ontario teachers are encouraged to provide specific and timely descriptive feedback to their students, and it is difficult to know what exactly this would look like in a classroom setting. Therefore, in this study I investigated what effective feedback looks like in the Ontario elementary classroom, and how closely it holds to the principles discussed above and in Growing Success.
Chapter 3: Methods

Procedure

This study is qualitative in nature and seeks to identify what effective feedback practices are used in the classroom. In this study I conducted a preliminary literature review and used that information to inform my interview questions. Once I completed my literature review and methods, I contacted potential participants via e-mail inviting them to participate in my study. I hosted face-to-face interviews with two in-service Ontario classroom teachers, and two instructional leaders from British Columbia. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed and analyzed the recordings, organized my data into domains and then looked for themes that could help me answer my research questions. Finally, I reported the results and a discussion of the implications of this research in a final research paper.

Instruments of Data Collection

The main instrument of data collection was a semi-structured interview protocol. The same general list of questions was used for every interview and this list was provided to each participant in advance of his interview. For a complete list of interview questions, please see Appendix A. Educators were also invited to bring samples of assessment tools and student work to the interview to assist in answering questions.

Participants

The goal of my study was to report on effective feedback practices in the classroom so I recruited participants whose feedback practices were considered
exceptional by their peers. Connections of mine at the University of Toronto and McMaster University helped me to locate my first participants after which time I used a snowball method of participant recruitment to find interviewees. The snowball sampling method is used when population-based samples are not essential and participants are difficult to identify or reach (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). When using this method, participants identify or recruit other suitable candidates for the study. In the case of this report, my first participant identified another, who in turn recruited a third participant.

I had four participants in my study; all were male educators in Canadian elementary and secondary schools. I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities. My first participant was Jim, a high school teacher at an independent school in a southern Ontario suburb. Jim has 16 years of teaching experience and was recommended to me because he has been running a unique assessment program in his class for the past several years. Jim decided to stop giving grades on assignments and instead gives descriptive feedback to his students. I was very interested in investigating this practice further and learning about student and parent reactions to this practice.

Shortly after my first interview I was introduced to Ray, a Southern Ontario elementary school teacher at a public alternative school. Ray has been teaching in elementary schools for seven years and is a supporter of Alfie Kohn’s ideas on assessment, advocating the merits of feedback over grading. Ray was suggested to me based on his philosophy of education and his feedback practices in class and after speaking with him it is obvious that he is pushing the boundaries of assessment practices in public schools. Ray, with the support of his school
community, has tried to introduce portfolios and markless report cards among other assessment programs that would emphasize learning over competition.

My two final participants are educators in British Columbia. In order to paint a full picture of effective assessment practices, I felt that speaking to educational leaders might be helpful. Ken is the headmaster of a private school in British Columbia and was recruited there, in large part, to orient the school as a facility of 21st century learning. A significant piece of this project was aligning the assessment programs at the school. Harry was brought to the same school by Ken to be the school’s Director of Learning and implement changes to the assessment practices at every level. I decided that understanding what is happening in other provinces with respect of assessment practices would be useful in my study; I would be better able to control for the influence of assessment literature on feedback and compare it to the influence of Growing Success specifically.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I performed an inductive analysis on my data because I wanted to uncover the themes that naturally emerged in my conversations (Hatch, 2002). I did not work deductively because I did not want to skew my analysis by potentially projecting ill-fitting themes onto my data. I took my transcribed notes from the interview and re-read them to get a sense for the data and determine general domains. I then coded my data by domains and proceeded to analyze the data within the domain to determine themes and relationships. This is an adaptation of the inductive analysis recommended by Hatch (2002) for educational researchers.
Ethical Review Procedures

Throughout the research process I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program. I provided each of my participants with a copy of my Letter of Consent (see Appendix C) and obtained a signed copy of this letter from each participant before beginning the interview. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw consent or refuse to answer any question at any time. Participants were provided with the interview questions ahead of time and all interviews were hosted at a time and place convenient for them. Participant confidentiality has been maintained and pseudonyms are used in this report to protect their identities.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size, this study was only able to provide a small glimpse into what effective feedback looks like in the classroom. However, even with these few examples, current teachers can begin to form ideas about how ideas from the literature and policies like Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) can be successfully implemented in classrooms.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

While talking to my participants, four general domains emerged and within each there were several themes. The first domain was Philosophy, and emergent themes within it were philosophy of education and assessment in particular, feelings on student motivation, and finally what influences have shaped this philosophy (including personal experiences, professional development, or engagement with literature). The second major domain was Techniques, where educators spoke about specific strategies that they used in assessment for learning and as learning environments, the specific elements of descriptive feedback that they felt were important, the role that numerical grades played in their learning environments, and finally instructional methods that made these assessment programs possible and effective. Educators also spoke a lot about the Responses to their practices, including any behavioural or academic outcomes for students, as well as feedback from fellow staff and parents. Finally, these practices and beliefs were linked back to Ontario’s assessment, evaluation, and reporting policy, Growing Success. Within the domain of Policy, themes were the influences of Growing Success on teacher practices including any overlap with the teacher’s own assessment philosophy, and how participants viewed the policy implementation process, as they experienced it.
Philosophy

Philosophy of Education

I believe that philosophy of education is a fitting theme with which to begin because generally a view on assessment, use of textbooks, or any other aspect of classroom business can be traced back to an individual's philosophy of education. Unprompted, in my interviews both Jim and Ray mentioned that they prefer the term *facilitator* to *teacher* when describing their roles in the classroom. Without going any further, this language implies a student-centred rather than teacher-centred environment. These educators felt that they were not transmitting knowledge to their students, but rather helping them as the students develop their own knowledge. This distinction is mentioned in *Growing Success* as well:

*The teacher acts as a “lead learner”, providing support while gradually releasing more and more responsibility to the student, as the student develops the knowledge and skills needed to become an independent learner.*

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 30)

Expanding on his student-centred beliefs about education, Ray believes that the current school system is based on an information-learning model that is not congruent with the information-appraisal and information-sorting skills that are needed in today's workforce. Similarly, Jim told me that students should be able to self-regulate their learning and therefore spends a lot of time coaching students in that regard as opposed to lecturing on content. Jim and Ray both
believe that a paradigm shift needs to occur to make education more relevant to students, and both are working towards making that shift happen.

**Philosophy of Assessment**

To Jim assessment is all about helping the student succeed. He explained:

*Assessment, aside from the summative, …is basically a growth opportunity. It’s for practice. It’s for skill building. It’s for knowledge-acquisition. Nothing is to necessarily pin the kid to that performance level on that given day. It’s always to see where he or she is today.*

In Jim’s opinion, assessment is used to tailor a student’s instruction and not to judge a student’s ability to perform on a task. This is consistent with Earl’s (2003) balance of education: lots of assessment for learning and as learning and just a bit of assessment of learning when necessary (see Figure 2.2.).

Both Jim and Ray explained that descriptive feedback is extremely important in helping students succeed. Only through feedback do students get the information they need to improve and work towards mastery of a concept or skill. Through descriptive feedback students know what they are doing well and what they need to focus on in the future. This has influenced both of their assessment practices.

**Roots of Philosophy**

Jim is an active researcher, leading the Centre for Leadership and Learning at his school and draws on educational literature to support his practices. He also spent time participating in professional development focused on assessment led by assessment researchers including Lorna Earl. Lorna Earl
is an advocate for the use of *assessment as learning* (2003), and this has influenced Jim’s assessment program.

Ray is a supporter of Alfie Kohn when it comes to assessment. Kohn is a very outspoken critic of the use of grades and other rewards in the education system (Kohn, 1993) and has written extensively on many educational topics including assessment, classroom management, motivation, and testing. Ray’s research into the literature around assessment and motivation has led him to rely heavily on feedback, as opposed to grades, in his classes.

**Student Motivation**

When speaking about student motivation, Both Ray and Jim agreed that numerical grades are dangerous because of salience to students, which is consistent with psychological research (Kohn, 1993). When grades are removed from the equation, or when the emphasis on grades is reduced, students need to be re-motivated to engage with their work. Both educators mentioned that choice is a powerful tool to motivate students because autonomy in the classroom supports intrinsic motivation, and this relationship has also been well documented (Dweck, 1986; Dickinson, 1995).

Jim mentioned that he always makes sure that his students have a larger purpose than just the completion of the task. He feels that if students can buy into the significance of a challenge then they will engage with the task more than if they are simply following orders. This is congruent with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) framework of motivation, which suggests that when individuals internalize the goals of an activity, even if they are still extrinsically motivated they will be able to regulate their own work on that activity (see Figure 1). If Jim’s students did not
internalize his goal of, for example, writing a convincing persuasive essay, then Jim would have to take a more active role in regulating his students' completion of the work.

Techniques

Assessment for Learning and as Learning

Both Jim and Ray highlighted the importance of assessment for and as learning, giving students feedback in many forms and allowing students to participate in the assessment process. To emphasize the importance of feedback and take the focus off of numerical marks, Jim converted all of his classes to markless learning environments. This means that he does not give his students any feedback in the form of grades, instead Jim conferences with his students on an individual basis where students present a product. The students are given both verbal and written feedback from Jim based on the success criteria for the product. Each student has an electronic portfolio where this feedback is stored for future reference so that students can return to feedback from previous assignments as needed. Jim ensures that he meets with all of his students on a regular basis so that the students' portfolios are representative of their progress throughout the entire year. Jim finds that this approach takes the emphasis off of achievement (of a certain grade) and redirects the focus to the actual learning process.

Ray gives lots of feedback in the classroom, usually verbally. He does this informally throughout the day and also gives written feedback to students in structured ways. Ray helps his students learn how to apply feedback by scaffolding the self-regulation process. He will give a “dip-in assessment” half
way through an assignment where he gives students feedback on their progress to that point. Then Ray checks in with students as they finish the project, looking for how they have adjusted based on the specific feedback that he provided. Ray also often has students self-assess and reflect on their own work, as a part of assessment as learning. To ensure that students take the task seriously and develop their self-assessment skills, Ray always provides a checklist or rubric for students to assess themselves against. He finds that asking students to simply give themselves a mark on an assignment is not as effective as working with a set of criteria. At times Ray even abstains from giving any feedback on a particular assignment, challenging students to determine for themselves how they think they fared. He believes that the ability to independently critique one’s own work is a very valuable skill.

**Descriptive Feedback**

A few principles guide these educators in their feedback practices. Both facilitators mentioned the importance of being timely, specific, and manageable in their feedback. In terms of length, Jim says:

> ...what I find is that about a short paragraph is best because the student isn’t going to read a novel or a very lengthy – so you need to make it concise enough that it becomes meaningful because they have the motivation to read it.

Ray reinforces this, saying:

> Make it manageable...If I don’t want to get at the grammar, there might be a reason why I didn’t mark up their grammar on there. I might want to focus on something specific like how they sectioned off their paragraphs,
or how they developed certain ideas, and to make them able to make a positive change it has to be one thing or two things that are clear.

Ray also likes to find something that the students were successful in, and keeps the tone positive. The guiding principles of feedback that these educators rely on are consistent with frameworks from the feedback and formative assessment literature (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Moss & Brookhart, 2009).

The Role of Grades

Ray and Jim have both struggled with the prevalence of grades, their influence on students, and the tools that are used to report them to students and families. Ray’s school finds it difficult to reconcile the holistic approach that they try to offer with the evaluation and reporting practices that are in place in Ontario and therefore the school has experimented with a few reporting options. They tried giving out report cards without marks, but Ray pointed out that since the students had to have marks in their Ontario Student Records the students were still given a grade, but it was not shared with the students or their families. This is interesting because one of the features of assessment of learning is that grades are shared publicly via the report card, raising the question as to whether this is actually assessment of learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Another project that Ray’s school had considered taking on was abandoning the report card system in favour of summative portfolios. However, there were issues with this approach as well, because the school community would need to be accustomed to this approach so it would have to start right in grade one for the new students. The approach is something that is being considered, but the task
seems overwhelming. Ray admitted that there is currently no correct answer or path to follow:

*Evaluation...is kind of a thorn in the side of holistic education.*

Jim handles *assessment of learning* in a different way: he treats the school year holistically and does not, strictly speaking, evaluate his students at all, as mentioned above. In Jim's courses, students are constantly creating their own learning, conferencing with Jim, and submitting products for assessment and receiving feedback all the while. The option to resubmit a product is always open. At the end of the term, when a mark must be reported for the students, a conference is held between Jim and the student where the student proposes what mark they have earned in the course with evidence to support their decision. It is only through this dialogic process that Jim reports marks, bringing a new *assessment as learning* meaning to the summative process.

**Instructional Methods**

Jim provides a completely customizable self-directed learning experience to support his markless assessment strategies. Students are able to choose the way in which they want to learn the course material and then pick how they want to demonstrate their learning, be it on a test or by designing a mini-putt course.

Ray also values student choice and tries to infuse it into his lessons wherever possible. Bringing student choice into play refocuses students' motivation from the marks to the actual project. Ray explained:

*Choice is a big thing – real, significant choice... if I let them choose between six different ways to present their culminating task, chances are...*
they’ll find something that excites them and it’s at least the same or better than saying “You have to do this for your report card mark.”

Response

Student Response

The educators reported that students, in general, do not grasp the distinction between assessment and evaluation without explicit instruction.

But the students really struggle with the difference between assessment and evaluation. I really think that they see it all as evaluation. It’s always “is this going to be a part of my report card mark” or this and that, and I try to take that out of it, but it’s locked in their psyche it seems. It’s almost always like “if the teacher looks at this, it’s going to affect my mark and if they don’t look at it, it doesn’t affect me,” and I really try to get them out of that, but I haven’t had success in keeping them out of that.

This is consistent with the reported motivational issues around marking (Deci et al., 1999; Kohn, 1993). Ray reinforced Butler’s (1988) finding that students ignore feedback when marks are offered:

Really most times if they get a piece of paper with a mark and a comment they look at the mark and either they’re like “yes I got that!” or they say “why did I get this?” and they come and complain to me about the mark. They don’t read the comment at all.

Jim said that despite his students’ confusion about assessment vs. evaluation he has had breakthroughs using his markless assessment strategy:

At first they’re confused. They wonder why or how I’m going to go markless…Once I explain it to them I would say that 90-95% of them get it
right away and even those that don’t all they have to do is go through one or two tutorials with me. They find out what the purpose is and how the feedback is given and then they understand why I’m doing it and they actually appreciate it.

Jim had the opportunity to study the effects of his practices through an action research project and his results indicated that the markless assessment was correlated with improved student learning. In addition, the results from the Advanced Placement (AP) exams that his students wrote at the end of some of Jim’s courses have further confirmed his suspicions:

What I’ve found is that my professional judgment from the anecdotal feedback I’ve accumulated was not at any great divergence from the numerical data that was accumulated from a standardized test, marked centrally by AP central and in that year it was in Denver, Colorado. So that adds a bit of justification to the validity of anecdotal feedback as well.

Colleague Response

Jim has had support from his administration and buy-in from colleagues who were co-teaching the course with him, however no one else has chosen to move to markless assessment practices. Ray feels that he and his colleagues are working together to figure out the paradox of evaluation in a holistic learning environment. It seems that overall, these educators feel their colleagues are open minded and able to adjust their practices to provide the best learning experience possible for their students. It should be noted again that Jim is at an independent school, and Ray at an alternative school in the public system. In both of these learning environments it is possible that there is a self-selection
bias among the teachers accounting for the more open-minded population than would normally be found in a public school.

**Parent Response**

Jim was shocked that his parents were very supportive of his markless practices after he had explained the process to his community. Jim ensures that every year he explains exactly how his markless classes work so that there is no misunderstanding between himself and the parent community. He reported that in over five years there have been no issues. It is possible that, because of the demographics of the school community, there may be a bias towards acceptance of unconventional assessment practices like Jim’s. Many parents are professors and doctors who have worked in pass-fail environments, and it is not certain that the Jim’s experiences could be generalized to any larger population.

True to that statement, Ray feels constantly at odds with his parents. He works with a diverse group of parents who are generally very invested in their children’s education but have conflicting ideas about what should be done in the classroom. Ray says,

*...parents don’t hear the verbal feedback, and then they think that you’re not giving feedback. So I find that an exorbitant amount of my time is trying to prove to the parents, who are very invested, but who are very used to traditional forms of feedback, a mark and a note about what you did.*

*I’ve had parents say “It worked for me when I was in school” so I have to say that things have changed since the 70s. Even here, where we’re*
supposed to be on the edges of newer ideas, I guess, we still have some very traditional people and parents.

We can understand based on these responses that the parent population will differ in many ways from school to school, but maybe parent support can be increased through direct and clear communication.

Policy

Influence

Both Ray and Jim supported the idea of Growing Success and felt that the document outlined best practices, including the provision of effective feedback. They think that the document is in line with the best available evidence on the subject and are happy to abide by it. For the same reason, Ray and Jim both confessed that Growing Success had not significantly impacted their assessment strategies. However, the document reinforced their existing practices. Jim reflected:

*It hasn’t impacted it in the sense that I’d already started doing most of what was in Growing Success two to three years prior. But what it did was it actually made me a bit more enthusiastic as an educator because now you’ve got the Ministry of Education buying into…what have now become best practices. So the Ministry is now a partner that is cooperating with teachers to allow them to assess in the most 21st Century way and the most applicable way for our students.*

Ray noted that the changes were positive, but they were not complete enough to allow for the restructuring of assessment that was needed in his
school. Specifically, Ray’s school has struggled with techniques of evaluation and reporting. He explained:

*Our problem is that we haven’t been allowed to go enough away from the traditional approach. We aren’t allowed to let go of some of those things that we’re forced to do, so then we can’t do the new things properly.*

**Implementation**

Neither educator had a huge amount of experience with professional development or other training related to *Growing Success*. However, Jim did find that his colleagues were more likely to implement *assessment for learning* and *as learning* techniques after the introduction of *Growing Success*, when compared to before.

*It hasn’t resulted in anybody going completely markless like I have, but it has certainly resulted in more of my colleagues doing far more things that are just anecdotal feedback.*

**Findings in British Columbia**

**Philosophy**

In BC similar practices are seen in Ken and Harry’s independent school. Both Ken and Harry explained the importance of assessment and, specifically feedback, in the learning process (with respect to assessment, Ken felt, “the feedback is the crucial piece”). Harry and Ken both referenced Wiggin’s and McTighe’s (2005) *Understanding by Design*; this model was influential to both educators and shapes how they see assessment to this day. Ken noted:

*The work of Wiggins and others really opened my eyes to [thinking about]*

“Why do we mark?” “Why do we give praise?” “Why do we assess?” “Why
“do we evaluate?” “Is it just to have a number at the end of the year and how does it link to learning?”

Harry’s educational experience has included work in administrative roles and with research groups, and has a strong understanding of assessment literature. Harry believes, like the other participants, that assessment for learning is critical to the learning process, but Harry also emphasized that assessment of learning warrants significant attention. He believes that the role of assessment of learning needs to be clearly defined so that the effects of evaluation do not interfere with student motivation or self-efficacy.

**Techniques**

Ken and Harry explained that their school is emphasizing assessment for learning as opposed to assessment of learning to improve the quality of their students’ experiences at school. They decided that to effectively introduce this change they would model it in their staff assessments as well. Ken said that feedback is given to teachers directly after frequent, informal observations.

Harry talked to me about the three ways that schools can support student learning and motivation through assessment practices:

*The first thing is to set up an environment where we allow students to take risks. If we grade absolutely everything that we ask a student to do and we average it, the student is going to get hammered if he or she takes a risk and the grade isn’t that high. So by setting up an environment where we physically grade everything and then it goes in as a summative grade, we’re setting up a structure where the students aren’t going to take risks…Number two: setting up an environment where students have an*
opportunity for more choice in their own learning; problem based learning, for example...[So ask yourself] what are the enduring understandings?...and then allow students to find their way to that answer. Give them the autonomy to do that...Thirdly, taking a look at how we assess, much of our assessment is aligned and recorded to the tool that we used to collect the evidence of assessment...The way that we report out grades and collect evidence should be aligned to the learning target, but most grade books are aligned to the tool that was used to collect the evidence.

While Harry did not directly address the role of feedback here, he underscored the significant role that grading and reporting play in student risk-taking behaviour and motivation. Grading does not have significant task information, which means that it cannot be as useful to students as descriptive feedback (Deci et al., 1999). However, grades are used in almost every assessment situation. Ken also acknowledged the insidious effect of grades, which even have the power to detract from the positive effects of feedback (Butler, 1988):

*For me one of the key pieces of research was when I discovered that for the most part when you attach a mark to something the students don't care about the feedback.*

Ken and Harry have implemented a change in the reporting process at their school. Instead of reporting academics alone, the school’s report cards now explicitly separate behavioural outcomes from academic outcomes. This means that grades are reported as normal, by subject, and then students are given a
separate evaluation in several behavioural domains. Harry explained the change is based on assessment literature including Ken O’Connor’s (2012) *Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades*. He expanded on the rationale for this decision:

*The fact of the matter is if the kid doesn’t hand it in, you don’t have any information with which to judge the kid’s ability in your class. Throwing a zero down is not a solution.*

Harry continued to explain that in order for behavioural issues (time management, participation in discussions, formatting on assignments, etc.) to be separated out from academic outcomes, the school needed to make sure that teachers were following up with behavioural issues. For example, if a student has not finished an assignment, then the only issue in the situation is that the assignment is not finished. The first time this behavioural issue comes up, a teacher might ask the student to stay in at recess and finish the assignment without deducting marks once the assignment is complete.

**Response**

Both educators acknowledged that their students did not appreciate the variable definitions and roles of assessment and likely thought all assessment was evaluation. Harry and Ken were hopeful that their students would come to understand the difference in time, although they thought it might be particularly difficult given their relatively homogeneous clientele. Ken and Harry’s school is renowned for high academic outcomes and therefore attracts students and parents who value those outcomes. Ken and Harry remarked that it has been very difficult to deter their school community from focusing on academic
achievement alone. Ken said that taking steps like including behavioural outcomes on report cards are helping, but it is still a work in progress.

Policy

A lot of the practices Ken and Harry have described are similar to those outlined in *Growing Success*. For example, the separation of behavioural outcomes from academic outcomes on report cards would shock no one in Ontario, where report cards have included Learning Skill evaluations since the 1990s (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998). The school’s guiding pillars of assessment are well aligned with the seven fundamental principles of *Growing Success*. For example, both require a variety of assessment tools be used, explicit connections between assessment and curriculum expectations, and communication of learning expectations to students before assessment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Conclusion

The participants of this study had fairly aligned philosophies of education and assessment. All of the educators acknowledged the importance of *assessment for learning and as learning*, and demonstrated their understanding of current educational literature. Participants all valued intrinsic motivation and felt that student autonomy and the use of *assessment as learning* could improve student engagement. The participants described how they have infused feedback practices in their learning environments and gave specific examples of the elements that they each try to include in their feedback. The educators also talked about colleague, student, and parent response to their interventions, with different participants noting different reactions, potentially based on the learning
community’s prior experiences with assessment. It was generally agreed upon that students did not appreciate the difference between assessment and evaluation. Finally participants discussed the similarities between their practices and the current policy that has been released. *Growing Success* seemed to be in no way at odds with these educators and directly calls for some of the practices that Ken and Harry have voluntarily implemented in BC. Overall, these educators seem to have a firm grasp on the role of assessment in education and based on that have established exemplary assessment practices in their respective learning environments.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The literature informs us that feedback is important in classrooms but not enough students are getting descriptive feedback on a regular basis (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This study looked at ways that educators are trying to make meaningful learning happen using evidence-based assessment practices. In Chapter Four it was determined that both Ontario educators interviewed have very similar philosophies of education, assessment, and student motivation, and many themes intersected with BC educators’ views. All four educators applied these philosophies in very similar ways – increasing opportunities for students to receive and work with descriptive feedback as opposed to graded work. These practices are in line with the Growing Success policy and are strong examples of the new type of assessment that has been introduced with this document. It is important that teachers in Ontario understand the qualitative shift that is being called for in assessment practices.

Student Engagement and Motivation

A recurring theme in these discussions has been motivation: how to get students motivated and specifically how to foster a sense of intrinsic motivation among students. It was often discussed that numerical grades can really interfere with student motivation in the classroom. Rewards, such as grades, can undermine a student’s intrinsic motivation to learn (Deci et al., 1999; Kohn, 1993). This understanding was enough to push Jim to move to markless
assessment practices completely and has also greatly influenced Ray. Could markless assessments be the future of our education system? Jim reported little trouble with his system and saw no reason why it would not translate well to a public school setting. However, teachers might be hesitant to relinquish marks when they hold so much motivational power over students. Harry admitted that motivating students to comply with behavioural norms without the bait of marks has proved difficult. Even in student-centred classrooms, the teacher still runs the class and a large part of the power that the teacher holds comes from his or her ability to give students grades. When asked about the value of grades, Harry responded:

Well Alfie Kohn will tell you get rid of grades altogether. He was one of my favourites going through my education years, and I always had a question that I never got answered: Has he taught in a classroom? (laughs) The same with Ken O’Connor. We know that these things are best practices for student learning, but at the end of the day the teacher still has to have some tools in the toolkit to be able to run the class.

What could replace marks to motivate students? Choice was discussed in every interview and educator believed that student autonomy supported intrinsic motivation in the classroom. Autonomy is a key factor in motivation (Dweck, 1986; Dickinson, 1995), but is it enough? Jim played out this exact scenario for us. In his markless class he gave up a lot of the power associated with grading. Jim also implemented a completely customizable instruction strategy where students had more autonomy than I would have thought possible in a classroom.
However, it seemed that even in a markless class he had to make use of grades at a certain point to influence student behaviour. He told me:

One of the observations I'm looking at is self-sufficiency. I've told them it's observed daily, weekly, monthly. So if they are not self-sufficient...then that's going to be going into [their portfolios] and that will be discussed in their marks conference.

As Ray lamented, educators still work within a system that has limits, despite the advancements of Growing Success. Even in a classroom where every element of the learning and assessment experience is customizable and interactive, students are still working with a prescribed curriculum to achieve established standardized expectations. Students may be able to choose whether they want to submit their European Explorers project in the form of a skit or a written essay, but they still have to independently demonstrate their learning of the learning expectations related to European Explorers. Similarly, teachers are still required to report on their achievement.

Every participant stated that he wanted to foster intrinsic motivation in his students. However, this is a very difficult goal to achieve in the current education system. It was mentioned earlier that in some situations of extrinsic motivation the locus of regulation can still be internal (see Figure 1; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Perhaps educators ought not worry about making a task inherently enjoyable for a student, but instead get the student on board with the enduring understandings and skills that will be developed by working on the project. When students can identify the purpose of their learning, they will be more likely to internalize the responsibility for regulating their own learning. For example, if students agree
that the ability to calculate tip on a bill quickly is a valuable goal then, although they might not find multiplication enjoyable, they will still actively engage with the activity.

**Role of Assessment of Learning**

The findings of this study cause one to question the role of assessment of learning in education, and appraise the tools that educators use to evaluate. Is the role of evaluation simply to communicate a student’s progress to the student and his or her family? Is it important that universities and other institutions know this information as well? What role does this serve in the learning process of the student? Could the same results be achieved through an extended assessment as learning program, as in Jim’s case. Jim seems to have found a loophole in the system that has allowed him to combine assessment of learning with assessment as learning, putting the burden of proof in the evaluation process on his students. In this truly student-centred environment students are not only constructing their own learning, but they are also evaluating it. One of the instructors in the MT program at OISE made the comment that good teachers teach themselves out of a job, and that is precisely what Jim is doing; he is putting students in the driver’s seat of their own education.

Perhaps teachers can get to the point where assessment as learning is so widely practiced that students are involved in the evaluation process, like in Jim’s case. Even in Jim’s case, the process of assigning marks is facilitated by an authority figure and therefore the grade is still correlated with power, but the process is much more interactive than typical evaluations. Could there be an extreme version of this markless scenario where students are trusted to entirely
evaluate themselves? In this situation the power associated with marks would disappear and only intrinsic motivation would remain. What would happen? Jim’s markless and customizable practices answer some questions but raise even more.

**Delivery of Feedback**

Feedback can be directed towards the student or the student’s work, and Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that feedback related to the task is much more effective than feedback related to the self. All four educators confirmed this idea. Expanding on these simple levels, Hattie and Timperley (2007) concluded that feedback should move beyond the task-level statements of “correct” or “incorrect” and dig into feedback about the student’s process and self-regulation strategies. The educators I interviewed spoke about this indirectly, saying that their students needed honest feedback that would help them improve. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of expanding on grades by giving more descriptive feedback than grades alone can provide. Grades give only task-level information. To move to higher levels, teachers need to switch to descriptive feedback, which is what the participants felt they needed to do.

Jim reinforced the importance of separating self-level feedback (“You’re smart!”) from feedback related to the task. He said that his students felt like they were in trouble or being punished in some way when they received his descriptive feedback. It is possible that these shame feelings are a result of the current system in which feedback is largely given only in terms of pass or fail, right or wrong, A+ or C-. However, Jim says that over time they really come to appreciate his feedback and use it constructively. This shift might represent the
shift in the students’ understanding of intelligence – moving them from an entity view (intelligence is fixed; something that one has or does not have) to an incremental view (intelligence is malleable; something that can be improved with effort; Dweck, 1986). This means that students will now be more concerned about working hard to improve their learning than looking smart in front of their peers because they understand that the harder they work the more they can achieve. Relating this understanding to Kluger and DeNisi’s (1996) Feedback Intervention Theory, students will be much more receptive to feedback when they shed ego-related concerns and develop goals related to the task. At the same time the students would have undergone a boost in their self-efficacy, as they now believe that they are capable of improving, and this supports their motivation to work towards their goal (Fullen, 2011; Pajares, 2009).

It is likely that Jim saw positive outcomes, at least in part, because his students were not afraid of judgment by their peers. Since no marks are given, students could not compare themselves with their peers even if they sought to, so students do not have to worry about protecting their self-esteem. According to research this would reduce self-handicapping and improve the chances of risk-taking behaviour and resilience in the face of failure (Butler, 1988). All of these outcomes are desirable in learning environments and are correlated with meaningful learning.

Ray mentioned that he prefers to give positive feedback to his students. This is consistent with Moss and Brookhart’s (2009) recommendation to be as positive as possible when providing feedback. Even when delivering negative content, a positive tone and valence should always be used, asking questions
and posing challenges to students, thereby inviting them to improve as opposed to stating what must change.

Ray said that characteristics of feedback like positivity and specificity were “no-brainers”, but in many cases teachers struggle with providing effective feedback (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The comfort level that my participants benefitted from when reciting principles of descriptive feedback suggested a natural tendency towards this particular area. As though perhaps these educators innately understood what students needed to hear and had adjusted their practices to cater to those needs. It is much more likely, however, that being a skilled provider of feedback requires commitment to investigating the literature and a lot of experience working with students. This makes sense given my participants’ commitment to educational literature and collective experience.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper, teachers can feel confident to move forward with student-centred assessment techniques including the provision of lots of descriptive feedback. In order to feel prepared to provide effective feedback, teachers might want to acquaint themselves with some of the literature around assessment as all of these participants have done (for example, teachers may want to start with Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Teachers who want to provide the best possible learning experience for their students will want to look with an open mind but critical stance at new assessment literature as it is released and make sure to always rely on evidence-based practices.
Educators should emphasize *assessment for learning* and *as learning* in the class and at the same time try to reduce the influence of *assessment of learning* by not grading all assignments and encouraging students to take part in the assessment process when it does occur. Teachers might want to take this one step further and consider making certain aspects of their class markless or marked through conferencing, like Jim’s classroom. Markless *assessment for learning* practices and determining final grades through conferencing are in line with *Growing Success*, but doing away with marks involves a large commitment from the classroom teacher. In general, this study adds to the body of research that suggests teachers should make room for descriptive feedback in their assessment programs.

In addition, teachers can improve student engagement by giving students autonomy in the classroom, as much as it is possible. Choice was a guiding principle to my participants in many ways. From a completely customizable course in Jim’s classroom to problem-based learning that improved engagement in BC, student choice puts the students at the centre of the learning process.

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of giving descriptive feedback often and in accordance with well-established frameworks. However, even when perfectly timed/targeted/delivered feedback is given to students it is possible that they will not respond to it. The participants in this study consistently reported that their students did not recognize the difference between assessment and evaluation, and that their students became very distracted by grades. One technique that teachers can use to tackle this challenge is to scaffold response to feedback, like Ray did in his class. Alternatively, teachers could explicitly teach
students the difference between assessment and evaluation, like Jim did, to increase student buy-in to the assessment for learning and assessment as learning processes.

**Limitations of the Study**

Questions of assessment necessarily implicate all other aspects of a classroom and become messy endeavours. This study is by no means an exhaustive discussion of the aspects of assessment in a classroom nor is it able to dictate best assessment practices for teachers to use. This study did not include any evaluation of student outcomes based on any assessment practices so none can be recommended as definitively best practices. Indeed, Ken pointed out in our interview, an evaluation of student outcomes would bring up the difficult discussion of what relevant outcomes are and in what way can they be measured. Here I have sidestepped the issue entirely. Instead, this study was simply a discussion of the implications of selected assessment options, as experienced by educators.

The assessment practices of this study may not be applicable in all classroom situations. All four of these educators had very similar philosophies of education and assessment and are dedicated to providing the best learning experience to their students. It seems logical to me that these men would be aligned in terms of philosophy because the new assessment framework and corresponding assessment practices are a direct result of educational research. Individuals who keep up to date on educational research would be well aligned not only in terms of beliefs, but also practices, as we see in this case. In my experience these educators are not representative of the norm; they seem to be
more open-minded and engaged in research than the average teacher. The participants referenced recent literature, understood current trends in education, and applied evidence-based practices in their classrooms, monitoring the results of their actions. Reviews of assessment practices indicate that classroom teachers generally give very little descriptive feedback to their students (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and common reasons cited for this are lack of time or teacher training (Crooks, 1988; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The participants in this study have made descriptive feedback an important part of their practices and, despite the rarity of formal assessment training programs, they have prepared themselves to provide descriptive feedback to their students. These educators are exemplary and it is unlikely that their practices can be easily transferred to the classrooms of less committed teachers.

Questions and Next Steps

Many questions have been raised in this discussion, but I believe that some specific areas of future research would be particularly interesting. Future research might aim to determine how widely Growing Success has been adopted in Ontario classrooms. This inquiry would require a very large sample size to get a picture that is representative of the entire Ontario teacher population. The study could be used as feedback to the Ministry of Education, helping policy professionals determine where resources should be allocated in the policy and programs development process.

Another interesting study might follow up with Jim’s action research project and take the practice of markless assessment to a larger pilot project phase. As
mentioned above, a challenge in this study would be the creation of instruments that could validly measure student achievement. Based on these results educators could choose to adopt all or part of Jim’s markless program, or it could be adopted as a standard assessment technique in certain schools or boards.

**Conclusion**

Assessment has multiple purposes and forms and recently a shift has taken place, moving emphasis off of *assessment of learning* and placing it on *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning*. The two latter forms of assessment support students throughout the process of creating understanding. Specifically, descriptive feedback is a significant part of the learning process, providing students with the information they need to improve without damaging their existing intrinsic motivation. Giving meaningful feedback to students is a challenge for many teachers, but since the introduction of *Growing Success*, Ontario teachers must be preparing themselves to provide descriptive feedback to their students regularly. Effective feedback targets the task, but more importantly the process and the self-regulation aspects of a task, and effective feedback does not include information that only targets the self. Descriptive feedback is also specific (while allowing for student input), gives next steps for students to work on, and is provided in a timely manner, rather than after the learning process is finished.

Assessment drives instruction and so teachers must be very careful how they design their assessment programs. The participants in this study have demonstrated exemplary assessment practices that draw on educational research as well as practical experience in the classroom. These practices are in
line with *Growing Success* and can be used to support student-centred learning in the classroom. However, every learning environment is different and therefore these techniques may have variable applicability to other classrooms.

Helping students discover what next steps they need to take to achieve their goal is the business of education. Descriptive feedback that supports student learning is important not only to student learning in the classroom but also to the development of self-regulation skills that will carry that individual throughout their lives. This study has emphasized the importance of the role of descriptive feedback in the assessment process and tried to untangle some of the implications that these practices may have on other aspects of the classroom. In conclusion, descriptive feedback is a crucial part of a student’s development and learning in school and Ontario teachers must commit to providing this resource to their students.
References


Furlong (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (pp.149-160). New York, USA: Routledge.


Appendix A: Interview Questions

Good afternoon and thank you for participating in this study. Today I am gathering information about the your classroom/school’s assessment program and what makes it unique. To that end, I am going to ask you a series of questions. You may skip a question at any time and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. The interview this afternoon should take between 30 minutes and an hour, and please let me know when you need to leave. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Background**
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grades have you taught?
3. At which schools have you worked?
4. Since you have started teaching have you had any professional development in the area of assessment and evaluation?

**Assessment Beliefs**
5. What do you see as the role of assessment practices versus evaluation practices in education?
6. What do you see as the role of assessment and evaluation in your classroom/school?
7. Do students see this difference between assessment and evaluation?
8. What is the role of feedback in your classroom/school?
9. What do you think are important characteristics of feedback?

**Classroom Practices**
10. What key feedback practices do you use in your classroom/school?
11. What are the strengths of this practice?
12. What are the drawbacks of this practice?
13. How has this practice changed student response?
14. What has been the parent response to this practice?
15. How does this practice impact on student achievement?

**Growing Success Link**
16. To what extent has the Ministry of Education’s document *Growing Success* impacted your practice?

**Wrap Up**
17. Is there anything else that you would like to add?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent

Dear ________________________,

My name is Christine Corso, a Master of Teaching student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT). This is a letter inviting you to participate as a research participant in the research I will be conducting regarding assessment in Canadian elementary and secondary classrooms. I am interested in learning about feedback-based assessment techniques and I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf and my research supervisor is Donna Duplak.

Your involvement will consist of a 30 to 60 minute audio-recorded interview, at a time and place most convenient for you. Prior to the interview, I will provide a list of questions, which will guide our interview, and you are invited to bring samples of assessment tools and student work to help you illustrate your answers (this is optional). The contents of the interview will be transcribed, and the data will be analyzed and incorporated into my final research paper. Your identity will remain confidential; pseudonyms will be used in any written report or presentation that arises from this work, only my supervisor and myself will have access to the data as it will be stored in a secure location, and will be erased five years following the conclusion of the study.

I would like to assure you that your participation in this research is completely voluntary and that you are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also decline to answer any specific questions. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project. Please feel free to contact my faculty supervisor, Donna Duplak or myself, should you have any questions.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Christine Corso
Principal Investigator
christine.corso@mail.utoronto.ca

Arlo Kempf
arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca

Donna Duplak
donna.duplak@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I, ________________________, acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Christine Corso and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________