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The background of the page features a large, abstract graphic element consisting of several overlapping triangles and trapezoids. The shapes are rendered in varying shades of dark blue and purple, creating a sense of depth and movement across the page.

# Learning in Practice

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- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

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# A More Formative Assessment Approach to Middle School



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## Abstract

In 2016 the Heads of Department met to discuss a new approach to assessment in the Middle School. The cumulative assessment approach that NESA mandates for HSC courses is not one that encourages deep learning, but was designed to reduce the pressure on students by spreading the assessment load from a single external examination to a school-based assessment. Using data from student surveys about their perception of assessment and the work of educators such as Black and Wiliam, the Heads of Department discussed the need to develop a more formative approach to assessment. This paper describes how that approach will look for Stage 4 at Barker over the coming years.

This article is part of a longer paper written for the Heads of Department, based on these discussions.

## The Need for a New Model of Middle School Assessment

The Heads of Department Symposium of 1 April 2016 was held to discuss assessment practices at Barker. It had been identified for some time that the current assessment approach puts too much pressure on students and that student learning was not the focus of this approach. For some time now a top down approach had been adopted, where the NESA (formerly BoSTES) mandated HSC assessment structure had been applied to Years 7 – 11. While there was a need for such an approach to apply to Years 10 and 11 in order to have students prepared adequately for their HSC year, there was no obligation by schools to follow a similar assessment plan for these or earlier years.

This brought into question our reasons for having an HSC style assessment program for Middle School. The benefits of such a program were that it allowed for an organised way to rank students to produce a final mark (which can be used to award prizes and set classes for the following year) as well as enabled staff to identify a student's strengths and weaknesses in set areas. However, there were significant questions to be asked about whether it did this at the expense of broad student learning and student welfare. Wiliam (2011b) states that this approach encourages a shallow approach to learning and teaching. He writes that students know they only have to remember the material for two to three weeks until they take the test on that material, and then they can forget it, so there is no incentive for the student to gain a deep understanding that is needed for long-term recall. For their part, teachers tend to set tests that never go beyond what they have taught; because the tests are predictable, students who are motivated do well, so both teachers and students feel good. This regimented approach assesses performance at only a snapshot of time and provides few opportunities for formative assessment practices. Such a program often provides less opportunity and little reward for students to show creativity in tasks.

It had been increasingly the case that students were showing signs of significant anxiety or stress and this model for assessment appeared to be a major contributor. Year 7 and 8 students had over 30 assessment tasks to complete each year and their focus was on getting through this process. With every task there was an element of stress. Some stress is a good thing (in the form of 'worry' about performance in a test) but a stressful assessment program conducted over several months made students apprehensive or even anxious. In the last ten years schools have noticed a greater number of students exhibiting work-related anxiety. Surveys of students at Barker had shown that they see assessment tasks as causes of stress but faced with an option of more tasks with lesser weightings, they overwhelmingly choose fewer tasks with greater weightings. To a student, a task is a task, whether it attracts a significant weighting in the assessment program or a significantly lesser weight.

Black and Wiliam (1998) in their seminal paper, Inside the Black Box – raising standards through classroom assessment, describe a concern about the impact on learning where feedback is given by reporting marks over comments. Black and Wiliam (1998, p 5) write that

*...where the classroom focuses on rewards, 'gold stars', grades or place-in-the-class ranking, then pupils look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than at the needs of their learning which these marks ought to reflect. One reported consequence is that where they have any choice, pupils avoid difficult tasks. They also spend time and energy looking for clues to the 'right answer'...*

Our current assessment program focused on formal assessment tasks that often limited the scope of what was being assessed. The richness of day-to-day activities performed in class was diminished by a more narrow assessment regime. Rich formative assessment tasks allow greater breadth in feedback across a range of objectives rather than focussing mainly on the knowledge, understanding and skills domains.

Black and Wiliam describe the importance of feedback and formative assessment on student learning and its importance in providing advice on what the learner can do to improve *rather than making comparisons with other students.*

Hattie (2009, p 14) synthesised over 800 meta-analyses about influences on achievement to present a perspective on key influences on achievement. He ranked these influences by effect size and noticed that some actions greatly influenced achievements, while other actions had considerably lesser influence. He found that everything worked to some extent. Hattie took an effect size of 0.4 as a meaningful indicator of a worthwhile action.

The work of Hattie (2009, p 297 – 300) showed the following actions produced significant effect sizes (and effect size in brackets):

1. Self-reported grades by students (1.44)
2. Providing formative evaluation by teachers (0.90)
3. Teachers providing feedback (0.73)
4. Setting challenging goals (0.56)

As identified by the vast bodies of work by Wiliam and Hattie on the significant effect size on student improvement by different measures, there was a need to develop a model of assessment for Middle School students at Barker that focused on formative assessment strategies that also allowed for opportunities for goal setting and self and peer reflection and reporting.

Wiliam (2011a, p 69) states "...it seems obvious that to get anywhere, it helps to be clear about where you are going, and yet, until recently, sharing learning intentions and success criteria with students has not been regarded as important."

## The Role of Marks in Monitoring of Student Progress

While the research is clear that a better model for assessment would be based on formative assessment and that there would be many benefits that flow on from such an approach, it was still important that the School track a student's performance longitudinally over time. This can be done both qualitatively and quantitatively, but for valid comparisons to be made over five or six years then there was still a place for marks and grades in reporting student achievement. The task was to provide a structure that allowed for this while taking advantage of the benefits of a more formative assessment approach.

## Using Rubrics to Evaluate Student Performance

The Heads of Department at Pymble in April 2016 agreed that different assessment models are needed in Stages 4, 5 and 6. The exact nature of these models was yet to be determined, but the Heads of Department created a 'road map' for future work, including:

- a. An emphasis on more formative assessment, particularly in Stage 4
- b. Assessments that will encourage a student-driven learning culture and inform teaching practice
- c. Education of the school community (students, parents, staff) will be of prime importance
- d. Reforms to the student reporting and future tracking process need to be aligned with any future assessment models
- e. Further discussion to occur on whether to report marks as well as A-E grades
- f. Timeline: Stage 4 reforms to be finalised by end 2016 for implementation in 2017

In addition to this, from the work of Hattie and Black and Wiliam outlined above, any new structure must provide opportunities for students to:

- know what success looks like
- have meaningful conversations with staff and parents about where they are at and where they need to go
- reflect on their own learning
- set meaningful goals
- be reported on (formally) more frequently without significant added workload on staff

The proposed change to Stage 4 Assessment was to provide rubrics against which performance would be mapped. A rubric is a set of scoring guidelines for evaluating student work. A rubric allows a student to see where their current performance lies against known criteria. It also allows them to see what a better performing student might look like. There is

a lot of power in 'sharing learning intentions and success criteria' to direct a student's future performance.

Departments designed rubrics that showed a continuum of achievement criteria (or descriptors) against a set of course related objectives, skills or understandings. These were written in student-accessible language with an even progression through successive criteria. To ensure a level of consistency across subject departments, a common language for key terms was developed. While the objectives against which performance is mapped differed between departments, there was consistency in the criteria for each level of performance.

The focus was on how a student can improve rather than making a definite and lasting judgement on a student's ability. The rubric was the mechanism for driving conversations about how a student was performing against the criteria.

## **Formal Assessment**

The formal assessment program for Years 7 and 8 would be reduced to two whole cohort assessment tasks per year (one per semester). It was envisaged that one of these tasks would be the Semester 2 examination and the other task a similar styled task during Term 2. In order to enable a student's progress to be validly tracked then similar tasks were required.

By removing all other assessment tasks, a teacher could then concentrate on the learning and teaching cycle, providing feedback via the rubric as an ongoing practice. Regular classwork, homework, class tests, projects, participation in class discussions, oral answers etc. could be used to provide a teacher with information as the correct placement of a student on each part of the rubric. Teachers would continue to collect and assess work in the usual way but use this work to provide evidence for their professional decision about a student's progress on the rubric. Data collection should be a less formal process. The aim is to remove opportunities for assessment by stealth.

Some other advantages of this structure might be a reduction in stress as students are concentrating on *learning* rather than preparing for a constant stream of assessment tasks, opportunities for goal setting using the rubric can be explored, the nature of Parent Teacher Night should be more constructive and informative and greater feedback to parents via a new reporting system would allow for more frequent and timely information.

## **Different Work not More Work**

One of the aims of this approach was to reduce the number of formal assessment tasks on students and to reposition the focus on to student learning. The everyday acts of teaching and learning would inform a teacher's judgement about where a student is placed on the rubric. This didn't mean that teachers needed to plan lots of little tasks and tests. In fact, nothing would be gained if all staff suddenly implemented a program of a class assessment schedule. Everyday activities performed in class, homework, participation in class discussions and activities would help the teacher make decisions about a student's placement.

Wiliam suggests that a better name for formative assessment is *responsive teaching*. Information gathered in the classroom informs the next cycle of the teaching and learning process

While staff and departments have saved time from a decrease in administration of common assessment tasks, more time is spent looking at evidence and discussing where typical students in their class fit on the rubric. This is to establish some consistency across all staff. Professional conversations, viewing of work samples, and analysis of class data drive this process. While some may see this as more work, in reality it is just different work. In some ways these discussions should enhance the teaching and learning process.

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