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CPL Podcast: Assessment K-6

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Mary-Ellen Betts & Sandra Rowan

INTRODUCTION:

You're listening to the JPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teacher Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today I'm talking with Sandra Rowan and Mary-Ellen Betts about some manageable and useful approaches to *Assessment using the NSW English K-6 Syllabus*. Sandra and Mary-Ellen, welcome!

Firstly we want to spend a bit of time talking about why assessment is so important and why it can't be separated out from pedagogy. So first question I want to ask to you both is why you see assessment as an essential part of teaching practice?

Mary-Ellen Betts:

I want to go with a really simple answer to begin with in terms for our students; it would be nice for them to be learning new things because someone's recognised that they've mastered their existing learning. So assessment is an important part of teaching in terms of acknowledging the skills and behaviours that the students bring to the classroom to start with.

Sandra Rowan:

Maybe an overall message is that basically assessment should inform our practice. It should make us change what we're doing and think about what the next step is. And self-assessment for children should be the same: they should be looking at that criteria and assessing their results against that criteria and thinking okay so next time I need to put in punctuation or whatever the thing is. So, it should be ongoing throughout the school year, constantly evolving across the year. It shouldn't be – "okay I assess on this week and then I never do it again for 5 weeks." The other thing about assessment is it informs your teaching, so building on with what Mary-Ellen said. If you know exactly where they are in their learning, based on the Syllabus outcomes, then you can plan the next teaching step for those students. And, what we have to do is value what they know and understand already and move onto the next bit. It's also part of the *Teaching and Learning Cycle*. So it's an essential component of that cycle. So we assess so we know what to teach, and then we plan the teaching, and then we assess again to see whether they learnt the teaching.



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Mary-Ellen Betts:

That raises the question that, in schools, we really need to think carefully about *what* and *how* we are assessing because sometimes we get caught up in gathering a whole lot of data that isn't always relevant, and isn't always appropriate, against student learning outcomes. We frequently in our courses reference the *BOSTES* (now *NESA*) article *Advice On Assessment* which gives an excellent framework for what assessment can, and should, look like in our schools. And it concerns me that at times we deviate and collect numbers for the sake of numbers.

Carly Boreland:

Yes, I'm really interested by how assessment has grown very, very large, so it's really important. But it seems like now there's so many different things that you can do. And, Mary-Ellen, you referred to the *BOSTES* which has had another reinvention so now it's called *NESA*. How important is *NESA* for teachers to be thinking about when they're thinking about assessment?

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Oh it is critical! The *Advice On Assessment* outlines Assessment as 'FOR', 'AS' and 'OF' Learning. And two of those 'FOR' and 'OF' we're really quite proficient at it and have been but we just keep adding things. It's the 'AS Learning' where students are more actively engaged in their learning through self-reflection and assessment. So for any school thinking about reflecting on what they're currently doing that *NESA* advice on programming is an excellent start because it talks about the *Standards Framework*, it gives some excellent advice on *Adjustments* and it really is the core part of what we should be doing. It's outlined beautifully.

Sandra Rowan:

It also has sample assessment tasks you can look at to get an idea of the types of things you might assess. *ACARA* also has a range of assessment tasks you can look at for each year/grade and think - "Would that suit my children? Is this going to meet the needs of my students?" So if you want variety, that's a very good resource to go and look at as well.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

The *Australian Curriculum* website has a number of portfolios - they're well hidden at the bottom of the Contents page (you've really got to go looking for them). But they actually give something like in English (my particular interest) it gives a portfolio of work samples *above satisfactory*, *satisfactory* and *below*. And when you go into those, the really interesting part of those assessment portfolios is the student reflections that outline how the students are demonstrating their learning and their thinking. And my particular favourite example is [when]the students were asked to create a poster to promote *Article 18* of the *Children's Rights* I think it is... the *United Nations Children's Rights* and it's a very simple poster; a kids drawing of a boat with some stick figures, some blue sky and some symbols. And you go, "that's nice!" And then you read the student's reflection. Now the symbols that have been chosen represent some of the religious groups that are being persecuted, around the globe at this point in time. The stick figures are faceless because she is trying to exemplify that refugees are forgotten and are not given a persona. The colours that are chosen are because they are sombre, reflective colours. Now this is a Year 6 student, who has drawn a very nice picture which probably would have taken 10 minutes but the



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thinking and reflecting, that is shown behind it, is phenomenal. And so looking on the *ACARA* website for those assessment examples can really allow teachers to expand their repertoire of what they think quality assessment tasks look like.

Carly Boreland:

So can I just go back a couple of steps? We've got *ACARA* which has some examples of work samples that are annotated and how they work. We've got *BOSTES* that provides information connected to the NSW Syllabuses about what assessment is (and those are our items of teaching that are legislated and that we follow in NSW public schools and other schools too). And then, Sandra, you were talking about the *Teaching and Learning Cycle* so could you just walk us through that? Because sometimes, I think, we assume that everybody knows what that means and where assessment fits in. But then we always ask people "well why are you doing all of these different tests?" and they often don't know. So somewhere there gets to be a bit of a disconnect, I think, between the *Teaching and Learning Cycle* and how you approach planning for your class and then where you actually end up doing.

Sandra Rowan:

So the *Teaching, Learning and Assessing Cycle*, - we start by collecting evidence about what the students know, and can do, and then we select a *teaching focus*. Then we do the planning about how that's going to look and we're going to develop the *learning intentions* and the *success criteria*. And, maybe, we're going to have an assessment task for that lesson, or, maybe, it'll be an assessment task after a series of lessons. And then we're going to teach that, and observe, and assess what the students are doing, as an ongoing classroom activity. We're looking all the time to see "who's got what? what's the next step for that child?" and we're going to be giving them feedback as they're working and setting and saying to them "how you're achieving your individual goal for that subject?" And at the end of that series of lessons, we might have a *summative assessment* that will inform our next part of the cycle. We'll also reflect on our understanding of the *success criteria* that we had for them - "did they meet that success criteria? Do I need to reteach this in some way? And did the students reflect on their learning, as we were going through that cycle?" So it continues on and on and on. So we may not reteach those outcomes exactly as it was before, but we might have to revisit that because some children had a confusion, or misconception, and we need to go back and make sure they have understood that concept.

Carly Boreland:

You're talking about starting with an understanding of what students know and can do and then moving on from there. How long does this take? Is this a process that's drawn out over weeks, or a whole school term, or is this over a series of a few lessons? How long or short or quick are we talking when we talk about a cycle like that?

Mary-Ellen Betts:

When we talk in terms of planning for English we like to talk in 3 week blocks. In the fact that you: this is what I'm teaching my kids now; now I've got to tap dance as fast as I can; they're going to learn it. And then throughout those 3 weeks I'm noticing, observing, making notes about what kids are doing so that I bring *formative assessment* through the *process* so that I can adapt my teaching as I go. And then I might have some sort of *summative assessment* at the end of it. What I would be really concerned about is



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having a barrage of tests that these poor little kids turn up at school and “Welcome to school my darlings, let me test you”. So, we need to keep a balance, and we need to go back again to that *Advice on Assessment* that talks about assessment being related to *Outcomes* and to the *Standards Framework*. When we talk to teachers we hear a lot about standardised tests that were out of date when I started teaching in 1973.

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Carly Boreland:

So if teachers are out there thinking, “I really want to use assessment in an effective way so I can be a good teacher: so I know what my students can do; so I can decide what I want to do next.” What are some of the resources and approaches that they could begin with?

Sandra Rowan:

There are some very simple tools they can begin with and one of them is called an *exit slip*. So after the lesson the students fill in, very briefly, ‘what did I learn today’ or something they noticed today. And that piece of information can be collected for you to look at. Or, I’ve seen it also done on a wall that is a chalkboard and as the students are leaving the room, to go to recess, they write up on a piece of chalk what they’ve learnt. And so you’ve got that visible evidence, you can take a photo of it if you want. The interesting thing about *exit slips* is that it’s a form of *self-assessment* which is really important and what they often say about what they learnt is not necessarily what you thought you taught. And that incidental, ongoing, daily assessment where kids are self-assessing their learning and you’re looking at it, you’re able to tweak straight away so tomorrow that means “I need to go back and have another go at that as obviously what they took away wasn’t actually what I meant!” Or, you can say “fantastic! everybody seems to have learnt what I was trying to teach. I can move on.”

The other one that is really important is *peer assessment*. We’ve got to train the kids to *peer assess* (meaning they’re in buddies first of all and that they are talking to each other about the learning. And it can start in Kindergarten. I have seen Kindergarten sit, with a guided reading book, and another child is filming them on an iPad as they read. So they read that little book and then they stop it, and rewind it, and have a look at it, and they’re giving feedback to that child about their fluency and their reading and then they swap. And that is a fantastic method for kids to hear themselves read. It can be done with a peer and I’ve seen 5 year olds do this beautifully.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

One of the schools I’ve worked in, the teachers came up with a routine that they name *book-on-book* and that was where they were supporting students to *peer edit*. Now one of the issues around *peer editing* is that frequently the editor edits in more mistakes than they edit out. And so it sort of undermines the success of it as an assessment tool. So what they did with the *book-on-book* was they identified that there would be two, or three, criteria that had been the focus of the lesson. The students put the books one



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on top of the other - the *author* read what they had written and the classmate gave them feedback, against the criteria that had been the focus of the lesson. No pencil touched the paper so that the author retained *ownership* but they were still getting feedback, against what was being taught. That routine just became part of what was done on a fairly regular basis. But it's trying to support students to hold themselves accountable for their learning. In classrooms, teachers work themselves to a standstill and frequently the kids can just loll around and say "can't you do it for me". So we need to inject that sense of purpose in the kids and assessment and a lot of the *Assessment AS Learning* tools that we've gained from reading Dylan Wiliam's (is a favourite) *'Embedded Formative Assessment'*. His simple routines have empowered kids to take on their learning and when you see it in action it's very exciting.

Sandra Rowan:

For example: *Two stars and a wish* is one of the ones we see quite often in classrooms. And that's quite easy, because you have a little symbol for it, and they can write the feedback on there, or they can say it orally. It doesn't have to be written, but they actually got a structure of the feedback they're giving and I mean teachers can use that as well. And so there are a whole lot of practical things out there that you can embed in your classroom that is fun but it is also getting kids to be *self-regulated learners* and thinking about their learning and thinking about "what was successful in here? Did they meet that *success criteria*?" And then also being able to have that ability to look how others' work and say "did you meet the *success criteria*?"

Mary-Ellen Betts:

I saw it in action in a classroom the *peer edit* and *peer support and peer feedback* and there were 3 little kids sitting over near the window and I thought – "Oh the teacher's placed them there for a reason. I'll just wander over here." And along came one of the little ones and looked at the book and I said "so what's happening, how's this piece of work going?" He said, "well, actually, this student has achieved all of the criteria" And this ragtag, little sausage went down the list: "they used First Person (and that's what we had to look for); they've used emotive adjectives (which is what we had to look for)." So I walked away, with my head in hanging in shame, that I could possibly think ill of some little possums who were rolling around the floor over near the window. Every student can do it!

Carly Boreland:

That's really interesting to me that approach of the teacher to that it's about what the student can do, (rather than trying to measure where they're at think but) to think about this person and what that particular person is able to do. And so then, what happens after that, rather than simply assessment for the purposes of a report, or for information that's collected by someone else.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

One of the tools we've used when moderating writing is to teach teachers to use a post-it note where we have a 3-by-3 grid and we limit the criteria to 3 points that we've been teaching. We give it a rating of 0, 1, 2 and we use really technical terms like *none*, *some* and *lots*. And all we're doing is working to get teachers together to have a conversation, "this is what I've taught - these are the kids that got it" and very quickly, using something as simple as 0, 1 and 2, identify who's got it and what they've got. Frequently, when we've tried to moderate in the past, we've tried to moderate to the same level as



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NAPLAN where we've given ourselves 12 criteria – we can go crazy. We want to moderate to see where the kids have actually learnt what we've taught them. And so a very simple, quick post-it note activity, with a group of teachers, you can moderate a whole lot of work samples, in half an hour, and you are getting really good information as to how many kids have got the learning.

One of the things that happens in lots of classroom is teachers take running records and they're fantastic. We need to spend time to actually go deeper to make sure we're getting the full breadth of information, the full depth of information, from those running records. Going beyond a level, or a score, and actually seeing what the kids are doing. Now the other thing we want to do, particularly once we're getting into the primary grades, is actually using that data and putting it on a quadrant. We got a very simple technique of folding a paper into 4 and we've got 4 boxes. Across the top we've got the kids who have made progress; across the bottom we've got the kids who haven't made progress; down the right we've the kids who are at, or above, grade level; and on the left hand side we have the kids who are a below grade level. Frequently we get caught up in how our kids in that bottom left quadrant - who are working below grade that haven't made progress. We spend a lot of time worrying about them. Usually teachers identify very clearly that there is a diagnoses (a particular issue around a learning difficulty) that identifies why that kid might be there. The kids across the top of the page - who are making progress - you just celebrate (even if they're below grade). If you've recorded a progress, from the last time you did a running record (either this semester, or before, or as your school decides) you can see the progress and you celebrate that. The kids that we seem to neglect, a lot, are the ones who are working at, or above, grade level but are just chilling out and are not making expected progress. And they're all the kids that are sitting in your middle two bands in *NAPLAN*. Or they're the kids who might have done well in Year 3 *Proficient* but when you look at them again in Year 5 they are still in the same bands it's just that *proficiency* has moved on. So we need to be having more conversations around what we can do for those kids. So it's actively using the data we have, in realistic ways, that are going to inform our teaching and our practice.

Sandra Rowan:

And that's quite a tricky thing to measure but we would all hope that's what's happening. Part of thing what you're talking about the ones that are quite capable students and actually, if you've got a very gifted child in your class, sometimes it's very difficult to know exactly where you have to go. So they may be in Year 3 doing Year 6 Maths. That's a big ask. So we're not saying this is an easy thing to do necessarily.

Mary-Ellen Betts:

Our issue is that, when we are planning, we don't need to build in extra tasks. We shouldn't have this "and now I'm going to assess". It should be part of what is happening. Now one of the things that frequently comes up, with teachers, is that they feel they are always assessing. Now you get that feeling if you are constantly being asked to do something *extra*. If you are able to say "at the end of my lesson I am getting an *exit slip* that's going to give me some information," it's building the student's learning; it's giving you good information; and it's *just* part of the routine. Where teachers really come unstuck with assessment is where it's an *add-on*, it's where they have to take away huge amounts of paper, and mark it, and put it on a class list, and put it in their bottom drawer. If assessment is integrated into the



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teaching practice, it truly integrates into that *teaching learning and assessing cycle*. If we're still in a setting where we spend X number of weeks, we're going to down tools, and we're going to do an assessment then we are operating in the middle of last century. Because that is not the way it should be looking. There is nothing in the documentation in our *Department*, or from *NESA*, that is saying that that is appropriate practice and that is what breaks teacher's hearts.

Carly Boreland:

Thank you, I am glad you say that. I feel so strongly about that! Sandra and Mary-Ellen we're getting close to the end of our recording session today. Something I'm interested in is one little gem, one little piece of advice for how a teacher can make their life *easier* through effective assessment.

Sandra Rowan:

My advice would be that the *responsibility* for learning has to be placed on the students. And that if you are expecting your children to make one year's growth, in your classroom, you'll have to help them do that by giving them *learning goals* and they have to assess them themselves, against those learning goals. So that they have to be *self-regulated learners* in terms of 'I want to learn; I'm going to think about my learning; I'm going to assess my learning' and this is the child we need for the 21st century. We do not need a child who says "okay I've done this piece of writing now it's your job the teacher to do the editing and I'll never look at it again". So thinking about the process of students taking on that responsibility for learning and for self-assessment would be my advice.

Carly Boreland:

Sandra and Mary-Ellen, thank you very much. It's been wonderful chatting with you!

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CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Sandra Rowan was previously a Deputy Principal in an Inner West Sydney school. She is an experienced K-6 classroom teacher and school leader. She has been a Literacy Consultant in Western Sydney and a teacher mentor working with beginning teachers to develop best practice. She spent four years working in New York schools as a Maths and Literacy Consultant. In New York she supported schools as they prepared for school reviews.



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Sandra has published eight teacher resource books that provide explicit units of work across key learning areas. She provides teacher professional learning at a school level as well as having presented at conferences on Literacy and Maths.

Mary-Ellen Betts has over 30 years' experience in K-6 schools as a school leader, classroom teacher and consultant. She has developed expertise in literacy education and co-authored a teacher resource book.

From 2000 – 2006 Mary-Ellen worked as a Literacy Consultant in Australia and New York City. The focus of this work was to support schools in improving educational outcomes for all students. She worked with teachers and principals at school and district level to improve pedagogy in literacy and to analyse data to inform instruction.

Mary-Ellen is currently working as an independent Educational Consultant for schools in NSW.