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Australia's National Assessment Programme rubrics: An impetus for self-assessment?

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ABSTRACT

Background: On an annual basis, students across Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed on their literacy and numeracy skills via the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), with the student performance data used for purposes including national accountability.

Purpose: Against this backdrop of large-scale national assessment, this practitioner-research case study explored the possibilities of using existing NAPLAN writing assessment rubrics as a basis for formative assessment purposes. Specifically, the aim was to galvanise and encourage a culture of self-assessment within one school, using the notion of intelligent accountability.

Sample: Participants included seven teachers and 126 students in Years 2, 4 and 6 (students aged approximately 7, 9 and 11 years), at an independent school in Northern Territory, Australia.

Design and methods: The data presented here derive from a larger study which aimed to explore ways in which assessment can be used to scaffold students' ability to self-regulate their learning, as part of a classroom writing project. Data sources included planning templates, writing samples, interviews with students and teachers, and email correspondence with teachers. The data were analysed for emerging themes and interpreted within a framework of social cognitive theory.

Findings: The analysis identified that students used the self-assessment process to set specific learning goals for developing a number of aspects of their writing. In terms of intelligent accountability, three elements of difference were distinguished: time, confidence and experience.

Conclusions: The findings from this study highlight the crucial role of self-assessment within classroom practice. The researcher-practitioner self-assessment framework developed suggests the potential for utilising large-scale assessment rubrics as a basis for formative assessment activity.

Introduction

This article presents evidence from a one-setting, practitioner-research case study into self-assessment. It draws attention to the crucial role of self-assessment as part of classroom practice. The focus is on fostering learners' ability to self-regulate learning: i.e. by learners being aware of the goals of a task and critically reflecting on learning as they

check their progress (Absolum et al. 2009; Andrade and Brookhart 2016b ; Brown and Harris 2014; Dann 2002; Earl 2003; Fletcher 2016, 2018b). Further, it explores assessment purposes in relation to change and agency, by investigating the possibilities of using an existing national assessment instrument as a basis for formative assessment purposes.

Background

Since 2008 (ACARA 2008), students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 across all states and territories in Australia have undertaken the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). This assessment takes place during May each year and involves tests of student ability in reading, writing, conventions of language and numeracy. The Australian government's website describes the student performance data from NAPLAN as an 'important measure of our education system',[1] thus drawing attention to the use of assessment data for purposes including governmental accountability for the country's educational system as a whole. As is evident elsewhere internationally (see, for example, Whetton 2009 for a historical analysis of national curriculum assessment in England), the implementation and uses of data from large-scale national assessment programmes has led to much scholarly debate and contestation in the educational community. NAPLAN is widely described as a high-stakes test, although it is worth noting that the literature can be divided into groups with respect to whether the test is described as high-stakes for schools (Johnston 2016; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012), teachers (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012) or the students themselves (Swain, Pendergast, and Cumming 2018; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012). In common with other countries where national, high-stakes testing programmes have been implemented, much of the research literature about NAPLAN reports on concerns about aspects of validity, curricular consequences and the perceptions of students and teachers on their experiences. For example, studies have suggested that the assessment has caused student anxiety (Thompson 2013) and led to narrowed teaching of the curriculum (Polesel, Rice, and Dulfer 2014). The tests have been questioned in terms of validity and appropriateness for Aboriginal students in regard to cultural knowledge demands (Wigglesworth, Simpson, and Loakes 2011; Klenowski 2016). In a recent study that focused on student voice and perceptions of NAPLAN, Swain, Pendergast, and Cumming (2018) found that students overwhelmingly used negative language to describe their experiences.

Although the current study was carried out against the backdrop of a large-scale national assessment landscape, it does not focus on the national testing programme itself. Rather, this paper offers a fresh perspective: it presents a small-scale study which explored the use of an existing NAPLAN instrument – the writing test's marking rubrics – formatively, to galvanise and encourage a culture of self-assessment within one school. As will become evident later in the paper, the NAPLAN writing rubrics are of particular value here as a resource, because they provide detailed descriptors of student performance in aspects of writing at different levels of achievement. In order to contextualise the study further within its conceptual framework, the sections below introduce the key notions of intelligent accountability and self-assessment.

Intelligent accountability

Intelligent accountability essentially involves putting trust in professionals who are clear about their values and goals (Klenowski 2009; Sahlberg 2007; O'Neill 2013). The term has been variously defined in the literature, with emphasis placed upon different systemic levels, ranging from schools (Ozga 2009; Sahlberg 2007; Klenowski 2009); to teachers (Cochran-Smith et al. 2017; Sahlberg 2007; O' Neill 2013; Klenowski 2009); and students (O' Neill 2013). Ozga (2009) describes it as a term informed by the principle that schools are effective learning organisations that rely on rigorous self-evaluation, strong collaboration and effective planning. In intelligently accountable schools, improvement is achieved through an annual cycle of planning, development, reflection and evaluation. In line with such conceptualisation, O'Neill (2013) portrays intelligent accountability as involving the use of assessment evidence as an indicator of effective learning, in order to judge confidently what has been learnt and to take the appropriate educational steps. Moreover, O'Neill emphasises that the evidence of learning must be useful for the immediate stakeholders – i.e. students, teachers and parents – otherwise it will not enable students and teachers to be held to account for the learning (or lack of learning) that goes on in a classroom. Thus, O'Neill's notion of intelligent accountability appears to adopt an agentic stance (Bandura 2006), by being underpinned by the idea that people intentionally exert influence over their functioning and the course of events that result from their actions. In this vein, the classroom activity of teachers using an existing rubric from a national assessment as an instrument to guide them as they analyse their students' achievements, and set new directions for the students' learning, appears to be a good fit with the notion of being accountable for students' learning outcomes.

Self-assessment

The adoption of an intelligently accountable stance, which entails using assessment evidence to evaluate what has been learnt and plan next steps, has a strong alignment with the concept of formative assessment. Reflecting on some influential formative assessment studies, in chronological order, gives a sense of how the concept has evolved and developed over time. Sadler (1998) emphasises the central role of feedback by defining formative assessment as 'assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning' (Sadler 1998, 77). Published over a decade later, Black and Wiliam's definition (2009) draws attention to the need to interpret and use evidence about student achievement to inform the next steps of learning:

> Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited (Black and Wiliam 2009, 9).

This outline of formative assessment as a process aligns closely with O'Neill's (2013) characterisation of intelligent accountability. In his critical review of formative assessment, Bennett (2011, 7) posits that formative assessment 'might be best conceived as [. . . a] thoughtful integration of process *and* purposefully designed methodology or

instrumentation'. In this vein, he argues that a meaningful definition of formative assessment needs to include a well-defined set of artefacts and practices. Bennett (2011), along with Hartmeyer, Stevenson, and Bentsen (2016), emphasises the need to strengthen teachers' formative assessment practice and ability to use purposefully designed formative assessment materials. In particular, Bennett (2011) presents a Theory of Action which includes five key strategies: 1) Sharing Learning Expectations; 2) Questioning; 3) Feedback; 4) Self-assessment; and 5) Peer assessment. These five strategies are used 'to direct the instructional processes of establishing where learners are (e.g. through questioning), where they are going (by sharing learning expectations), and how to get them there (through feedback)' (Bennett 2011, 8). Bennett clearly positions self-assessment as a central tenet of formative assessment. A similar emphasis of the connectedness between self-assessment and formative assessment is articulated by Andrade (2019, 2), who states that the purpose of self-assessment is to 'generate feedback that promotes learning and improvements in performance'. As she goes on to emphasise, the 'learning-oriented purpose of self-assessment implies that it should be formative: if there is no opportunity for adjustment and correction, self-assessment is almost pointless.' (Andrade 2019, 2).

While Bennett characterises self-assessment as 'activating students as the owners of their *own* learning' (2011, 8, author's emphasis), self-assessment is commonly described as positioning learners as *co-owners* in the learning process by critically reflecting on their learning as they address the task requirements (Absolum et al. 2009; Dann 2002; Earl 2003; Fletcher 2016, 2018b). Regardless of whether students are positioned as 'owners' or 'co-owners', self-assessment entails a learner being aware of the goals of a task and checking their own progress towards them. It therefore requires learners to develop the ability to analyse the task requirements, and set goals for their learning and monitor their understanding as they actively engage in the learning process (Andrade and Brookhart 2016a ; Andrade 2019; Brown and Harris 2014; Harris and Brown 2018). As such, self-assessment is a central tenet of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), which is commonly defined as denoting a learner's ability to plan, monitor and control their thoughts, feelings and actions (e. g. Hadwin, Järvelä, and Miller 2011; Pintrich 2004; Wigfield, Klauda, and Cambria 2011; Zimmerman and Schunk 2011). Drawing on SRL theory, the self-assessment process, as employed in this study, comprises a *forethought, performance* and a *self-reflection* phase. It is a process which is designed to promote students' autonomy as learners, manifested as students being proactive in the learning process by initiating thinking and directing their learning as part of classroom-based critical inquiry (Hargreaves 2014).

In the *forethought* phase, the teacher carefully supports the student through the process of setting up the task. Within the forethought phase, students analyse the task, set partial goals for segments of the task and identify appropriate learning strategies (Andrade and Valtcheva 2009; Fletcher 2016, 2018a; Panadero and Alonso-Tapia 2013). The planning that students undertake in this phase is an important self-assessment aspect (Andrade 2010). By understanding explicit criteria, students are able to set more realistic goals for themselves, which, in turn, is thought to contribute to their level of motivation as they persist with tasks (Fletcher 2016; Panadero, Jonsson, and Strijbos 2016). Also, having a clear understanding of the learning goals enables students and teachers to take action to close the learning gaps (Fletcher 2018b).

The second phase of the self-assessment process, the *performance* phase, involves students exercising self-control by employing learning strategies to solve the task at hand. In this phase, students monitor and regulate their learning progress, with support from their teacher – for example, in the form of conferencing. As Cleary and Labuhn (2013) report from case studies into self-regulation and interventions with high-schools, conversations between students and teachers about what strategies students can employ to support their own learning fulfil an important motivational purpose by helping students sustain their efforts as they learn. The performance phase often involves students engaging in self-assessment as they describe, reflect on and assign merit to the quality of their work, evaluate the degree to which it meets the success criteria and revise their work accordingly (Andrade 2010; Panadero, Jonsson, and Botella 2017). There is well-documented support for self-assessment as a strategy for students to monitor their learning progress. For example, in a randomised-controlled study where a formative assessment intervention in writing assignments was carried out with upper primary students in the Netherlands (Meusen-Beekman, Joosten-ten Brinke and Boshuizen 2016), findings indicated that both peer-and self-assessment increased student motivation and were effective in developing learning strategies.

The third phase, the *self-reflection phase*, is generally conceptualised as prompting a new iteration of the cycle, starting with forethought (Andrade and Brookhart 2016b ; Chen and Rossi 2013; Cleary and Labuhn 2013; Zimmerman 2011). The self-reflection phase entails students and teachers evaluating how effective they have found the strategies they have employed. They also identify the strengths and weaknesses of their approach in relation to the task criteria and set goals. In line with formative assessment principles, the self-reflection phase needs to inform future learning and teaching, if it is to have a positive impact on learning.

Purpose of the study

The practitioner-research case study presented below aimed to explore the use of a self-assessment planning template, developed collaboratively by the researcher and the teachers, as a means to build students' self-assessment capabilities and ability to self-regulate learning. The research questions addressed were as follows: *1) How do students a) employ learning strategies* and *b) develop competence as learners, when using a self-assessment planning template?*

Method

Ethical considerations

The study had full approval from the relevant university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Informed written consent was obtained from the school principal, parents/guardians of the participating students, and the students and teachers themselves. To protect the anonymity of the participants, all names were replaced with pseudonyms before the data were coded and analysed. The participants were assured in writing that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice. The majority of students and parents/guardians gave their consent for participation in the study. Because

the study was designed to be implemented as part of classroom practice, student non-participation in the study simply meant that their planning templates and writing samples were excluded from the data collection. An additional ethical consideration was only to involve students and teachers from year levels *not* included in the NAPLAN tests, in order to avoid any additional workload or burdens on the year groups undertaking the tests.

The school context

The data presented here were collected from seven teachers and 126 students from classes in Years 2, 4 and 6 (students aged approximately 7, 9 and 11 years) at an independent (non-government, non-religious) school in Northern Territory, Australia. A purposefully selected sample (Creswell 2014) of whole classes was invited to participate in the study. For the reasons detailed above, Years 2, 4 and 6 were deliberately selected because they constituted year groups not involved in undertaking the NAPLAN tests. The seven teachers comprised a diverse group with regard to teaching experience (ranging between less than 5 years to more than 15 years) and age (including teachers in their twenties, thirties and forties).

Overview of study design and procedure

The position of the researcher can be described as being an 'insider-outsider' (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Fletcher 2019). As a long-standing member of staff at the school, and thus well immersed in the setting, the researcher was predominately an insider. However, while the researcher was present when the writing projects were initiated in each class, the researcher was an outsider in the sense that she was not present in each class throughout the entire learning process. This relative distance helped interview participants to avoid making the assumption that the researcher was already familiar with their experiences (Breen 2007). Equally, not being in the classrooms throughout the learning process helped the researcher step outside the situation, which facilitated theorisation (Burton and Bartlett 2005).

The study was conducted as a writing project which involved six phases, as illustrated in Table 1. In the first phase, the researcher and teachers collaboratively developed a planning template for each year level (described in detail below). They used the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) for *Writing* (NTG 2009), and the descriptors from the NAPLAN marking rubrics (ACARA 2010) to develop the descriptors and prompts on each template. As the teachers at the school were already in the habit of using the rubrics to moderate students' writing samples prior to writing term reports, it was a natural step for them to take the rubrics' descriptors into consideration when designing the templates. In the second phase of the project, the teachers used the planning templates as part of the writing lessons with their class, to scaffold a self-assessment process which entailed students planning, drafting and publishing a text. During this phase, the researcher met with teachers individually and was in regular email correspondence with each teacher, in order to gather their perceptions of how the writing project was working in their class. The researcher also conducted an initial interview with students in each class. As the data were collected,

Table 1. Study phases, data and participants.

Project stages	Data sources	Participants/samples

Phase 1: Design	Year 2 planning template
	Year 4 planning template
	Year 6 planning template
		Researcher and
		  Yr. 2 Teachers (n = 2)
		  Yr. 4 Teachers (n = 2)
		  Yr. 6 Teachers (n = 3)

Phase 2: Implementation	Initial interviews	Teachers (n = 7) Students (n = 10)
	Email correspondence	Teacher emails (n = 15)
	Students' writing samples	Year 2 samples (n = 48) Year 4 samples (n = 40) Year 6 samples (n = 38) Total samples (n = 126)
Phase 3: Reflection (post projects)	Follow-up interviews	Teachers (n = 7) Students (n = 10)
	Email correspondence	Teachers (n = 7)

Phase 4: Judgements on the writing
  samples using the rubric
	Students' writing samples	Teachers (n = 2) who marked all writing samples
		  (n = 126) using the rubric

Phase 5: Analysis of students' planning
  templates
	Students' completed
	  planning templates
		Year 2 (n = 48)
		Year 4 (n = 40)
		Year 6 (n = 38)
		  Total planning templates (n = 126)

Phase 6: Synthesis	All data sources	Researcher

the researcher organised the data and began to identify emerging themes, so that these could be followed up in later interviews.

In the third phase of the study, which occurred a week or so after the students had finished their writing projects, two students from each class were interviewed in pairs by the researcher about their experiences of the writing project. During this phase, each teacher was also interviewed individually, which meant that they could comment on the project with the benefit of some hindsight. In the fourth phase, all the participating students' writing samples (*n* = 126) were scored using the marking rubrics. The scoring was undertaken by two teachers who had previously served on NAPLAN marking panels, and, as such, had undertaken formal marking training. Neither marker taught any of the participating classes. In the fifth phase, the researcher analysed the students' planning templates and compared them with the students' writing sample. In phase six, she synthesised the entire data set by the application of social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986).

Development of writing planning templates

As mentioned above, the collaboratively-developed writing planning templates for each year level targeted the relevant syllabus outcomes in the *Writing* strand of the NTCF (NTG 2009). These planning templates were specifically designed to scaffold the forethought, performance and self-reflection phases of learning (Fletcher 2018b; Zimmerman 2011). For practical reasons, each template was designed to fit on a folded A3 sheet, which meant that each student's planning was on one single document that consisted of four pages. The first page was a cover sheet, which included space for the student to write their name. The second and third pages of the template created a centrefold (illustrated in Figure 1, which presents these pages of the Year 2 template[2]). This part scaffolded the forethought phase as three separate subparts, with specific prompts for the students, as shown in the first three 'thought bubbles' in Figure 1.
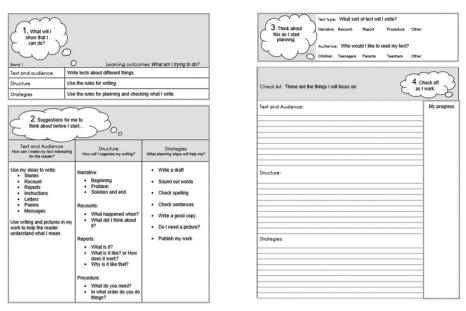
Figure 1. Pages 2 and 3 of the Year 2 writing planning template: forethought sections

The first forethought subsection included the relevant curriculum learning outcomes (NTCF 2009), which had been worded by the teachers in a 'student-friendly' manner so that students would be able to understand these learning outcomes and use them as learning intentions and success criteria for their writing project. As Figure 1 is from the Year 2 template, it is set out in larger font size and with less, and more simplified, text than the templates for Year 4 and Year 6 (see further Footnote 2). A copy of the Year 6 template has been published elsewhere (Fletcher 2016).

In all three templates, the main section of page 2 provided a selection of suggested strategies. These were for students to refer to as they undertook the forethought process of splitting the success criteria into partial goals, which they would use to monitor their work (Fletcher 2016). The third forethought subpart, at the top of page 3, required students to consider the type of text and audience they would target as they developed their writing. The main section of page 3 was designed as a transitional phase between the forethought and performance phases of the learning cycle (Fletcher 2016). It consisted of a checklist section divided into three sub-headings: *text and audience; structure* and *strategies*. Each sub-heading had some space provided for students to scribe partial goals during the forethought phase, which then was used to prompt students' monitoring of their progress during the performance phase. In the performance phase – prompted by 'thought bubble' number 4 on page 3 – the students commenced their writing projects by developing a draft and checking their progress against the success criteria identified in the previous phase. It required students to engage in SRL skills such as managing time, and monitoring and regulating their use of learning strategies to persist with the task at hand (Zimmerman and Schunk 2011). The final phase of the self-assessment cycle was scaffolded on page 4 of the template (see Figure 2). It entailed students reflecting back on

Figure 2. Page 4 of the Year 2 writing planning template: self-reflection sections

their work and self-evaluating their achievements through responding to questions, including *How would I rate my finished work? What can I improve?* (Fletcher 2016).

Correspondence with teachers, and interviews with teachers and students

The data collection included regular semi-structured email correspondence with the teachers throughout the writing project. Teachers were invited to respond to structured, open-ended questions to prompt reflection. The study was also informed by two iterations of semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The first iteration was conducted during the time that the writing project was underway. The second iteration was conducted at the completion of the writing project. This gave the students, teachers and the researcher time to reflect on the experience with the benefit of hindsight. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher at the time of data collection.

Marking rubrics

The NAPLAN marking rubrics (ACARA 2010) was used to analyse students' writing samples. As mentioned above, the teachers at the school routinely used these rubrics to double mark and moderate writing samples from their students. This meant that they were already familiar with many components of the rubrics. The rubrics provide detailed descriptors for different levels of performance for 10 separate skill foci of writing, with a definition of the underlying skill for each focus. Two sets of rubrics have been developed by ACARA (2010, 2012); one set for marking *Imaginative writing* and one for *Persuasive writing*. Both sets of rubrics share the first three skill foci: 1) Audience; 2) Text structure; 3) Ideas. The fourth skill focus differs depending on the genre: for Imaginative writing, it is 4) Character and Setting and for Persuasive writing, it is 4) Persuasive devices. The two sets of rubrics have the remaining skill foci in common. These are: 5) Vocabulary; 6) Cohesion; 7) Paragraphing; 8) Sentence structure; 9) Punctuation and 10) Spelling. Each skill focus has an associated score range. Each score level has a separate descriptor of performance in the relevant rubric and the range includes additional information to help inform judgement. The ranges are used to judge writing on a continuum: the same rubrics are used to score writing from students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. As such, the rubrics could function as a useful instrument for assessing the writing samples generated by students in this study, because the instrument could be used to evaluate the writing samples from students across Years 2, 4 and 6.

Data analysis

The researcher used voice-recognition software to transcribe all the initial teacher interviews while the project was underway (Fletcher and Shaw 2011). This enabled quick and timely transcription while enabling the researcher to become familiar with the data (Davidson 2009). Analysis of transcripts from the initial teacher interviews, combined with the email correspondence from the teachers, provided the basis for the first set of preliminary analytical codes (Lankshear and Knobel 2004). A similar process of transcription and preliminary coding was adopted in the initial analysis of the student interviews, planning templates and writing samples (Lankshear and Knobel 2004). Repeated reading of transcripts and students' planning templates enabled the researcher to identify similar data, to a point of saturation (Creswell 2014), when no new data codes emerged. This generated 35 preliminary codes in total. An approach informed by social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), which holds that human functioning is influenced by personal, situational and behavioural factors that mutually influence one another, was used to interpret the coded data. This indicated that the majority of the preliminary codes related to *intrapersonal* dimensions (see Table 2). To a lesser degree, the data sets included descriptive references to teaching and learning practices, which, from a social cognitive perspective, were classified as *behavioural* factors.

Table 2. Students' intended audiences, as indicated by their writing planning templates.

Intended Audience	Percentage of Year 2 templates n = 48	Percentage of Year 4 templates n = 40	Percentage of Year 6 templates n = 38
Children	46%	45%	39%
Teenagers	13%	6%	14%
Parents	21%	6%	3%
Teachers	13%	16%	3%
People in [local city]	0%	6%	12%
People in power	0%	0%	0%
Other	Friends (3%) Grandmother (3%) Sister (3%)	Everyone (2%) Family (2%) Puppy lovers (2%) Professional groups (8%) Soccer fans/trainers (2%) Students in Year 4 (6%)	All adults (2%) Anyone (5%) Anyone, but not young children (2%) Children in Year 6 (2%) Everyone (9%) People (2%) People in Australia (2%) Tweens (7%)

Note on Table 2: due to rounding, percentages may not add to 100%

Findings and discussion

The study set out to explore how students a) employed learning strategies and b) developed competence as learners, when using a self-assessment planning template. The subsections below present the findings of the qualitative analysis structured according to how the analysis of data related to the skill foci of the writing test rubrics (i.e. Audience, Text structure, Ideas and so on). This is followed by a wider discussion of the self-assessment process in relation to agency and change. Where relevant, anonymised quotations from the data are used to illuminate and illustrate points. All names are pseudonyms.

Presentation of findings according to writing rubric skills foci

Audience

The analysis of planning templates showed that students had thought about how to engage their chosen audience. The majority of students' templates across all three year-levels specified children and, to a lesser degree, teenagers as their intended audience (see Table 2).

The important point drawn out of the analysis here was the reflections, in the interviews and email correspondence, on the rationales and thinking behind the choices. Specifically, in the interviews, several students explained that they had chosen children as their audience because they wanted their peers to read their writing. Students' awareness of their intended audience was also discussed in the teacher interviews and email correspondence: for example, the Year 2 teachers felt that their students had exceeded their expectations by being able to identify and write for a specific audience. Similarly, Elle, one of the Year 6 teachers, commented in her follow-up interview on how she thought students' choice of the audience appeared to have motivated them:

Elle: I felt that they understood what they were writing it for.

Q: So, the audience aspect?

Elle: The audience aspect, yes. And it's … They didn't just show me that they understood the structural: how to do it. It wasn't so mechanical. It was more … they just gripped on to it. It was like: *Right, there is a meaning for this; I know whom I'm writing it to, and for, and why I'm writing it. So, I'm going to do the best I can do.*

Text structure

Overall, although eight different types of texts were produced by the students (see Table 3), most could be classified as fiction. By far the most popular text type was *Narrative*.

In their interviews, the teachers commented on students' range of chosen text types in two particular ways. First, several teachers spoke about how the range of different text types had prompted them to implement various teaching strategies, such as conferences with groups of students who had chosen similar text types. Secondly, as illustrated below from the follow-up interview with Sam, who taught Year 4, some teachers expressed surprise in the students' choices:

Sam: I was interested in seeing what they choose. I would have expected them to choose narratives, but they didn't do it that way. There was a good assortment, wasn't there? So that was … Yeah, it was interesting that so many of them obviously found procedures, for example, a lot easier. And poetry! Some did poetry! Hmmm, which was good to see.

Q: So that surprised you?

Sam: Yeah, it was interesting, I thought. Because we had concentrated on narratives, more on narratives than anything else. So, my natural thought would be: 'okay they're going to … '

Q: You thought that narratives would be in their comfort zone?

Sam: Yeah! I mean, obviously we've looked at other things, but some of those are the things some of them obviously find easier, or more enjoyable, which is good.

Ideas

Given that the majority of students wrote imaginative texts, the descriptors in the marking rubric for narratives were the most applicable. The Ideas descriptors range from a score of 0, in which 'no evidence or insufficient evidence' of ideas are presented in the text; to

Table 3. Students' choice of text, as indicated by their writing planning templates.

Text Type	Percentage of Year 2 templates (n = 48)	Percentage of Year 4 templates (n = 40)	Percentage of Year 6 templates (n = 38)	Percentage of all templates (n = 126)
Narrative	43%	48%	43%	44%
Poetry	9%	18%	18%	14%
Procedure	13%	20%	1%	13%
Information report	11%	3%	18%	10%
Recount	15%	8%	3%	9%
Play	0%	5%	8%	4%
Letter	11%	0%	0%	4%
Fictional recount	0%	0%	5%	2%

Note on Table 3: due to rounding, percentages may not add to 100%

a score of 5, for texts in which 'ideas are generated, selected and crafted to explore a recognisable theme [and] ideas are skilfully used in the service of the storyline' (ACARA 2010, p. 8). The notion of selecting and crafting ideas for a text was mentioned by students in their interviews, as illustrated in the following quotation from a follow-up interview with a Year 2 student:

Q: How did you find the whole writing experience?

Clive: It was kind of tricky and fun. The tricky bit was that you had to think of your own story. And the fun bit was that you've got to make a problem and they, like, solve it and what's the beginning and so on. So, yes, that was fun about it.

It was noteworthy that, in both the interviews and in the self-reflection section of the planning templates, students frequently nominated 'imagination' as a key part of their skills they sought to develop as a writer. For example, another student in Year 2 nominated this as an area of strength in his interview: 'I think I am a good writer because I have got a wide imagination'.

Character and setting

Across the data sets, findings relating to this category were relatively scarce. Considerations about character and setting had been brought up to a limited degree by the teachers in the design phase, resulting in three suggestions in the forethought part of the Year 4 and Year 6 planning templates. For example, a small four-section chart of thoughts, feelings, sights and sounds was included in the *strategy* column of the template used by Year 4 and Year 6. However, reflection on the character and setting skills focus did not feature in the email correspondence or teacher interviews.

Vocabulary

The students' awareness of the importance of precise word choices was manifested on the planning templates. For example, students identified their intentions to use *descriptive words, rhyming words, adjectives*, and *command verbs*. The templates also indicated the intention to *vary vocabulary*. Analysis of the students' writing samples, by way of judgements using the rubrics, identified that the majority of students in Year 4 and Year 6 used precise words or word groups. In Year 6 this was more pronounced, with many students' writing demonstrating 'sustained and consistent use of precise words and phrases that enhances the meaning or mood' (ACARA 2010, p. 10).

Cohesion

Cohesion is a text feature used to link ideas and concepts in a text, and to control relationships over the whole text through devices such as referring words, substitutions, word associations and ellipsis (ACARA 2010). The Year 2 planning template did not explicitly contain suggestions relating to this aspect of writing. However, the *structure* column of suggestions on the Year 2 template included questions aimed at helping students to develop cohesion in their writing (see Figure 1). The Year 4 and the Year 6 templates comprised a greater number of prompting questions, such as 'Does my writing make sense?' and 'Is it clear who is speaking?' aimed at cohesive considerations. In terms of students nominating writing goals relating to cohesion, none of the Year 2 students' templates stated cohesion-connected goals. However, comments

made by students in interviews indicated their awareness of cohesion – for example, by reflecting whether their text 'made sense'. In contrast, with the Year 2 students' planning templates, cohesive goals were clearly identified on the checklist of goals for Year 4 and Year 6 students. For example, in Year 4, around one-third of the students indicated in their planning that the student would check that their writing made sense. In Year 6, the cohesive goals were more diverse and included plans to pay particular attention to their use of pronouns. In addition, nine students planned to check that they included 'clear information', which suggests an intention to check that ideas were logically presented.

Paragraphing

Students' consideration of paragraphs was evident as a *forethought* in the planning templates or as part of the *performance* reflected in the written sample, but not always together. For example, in Year 2, although only two out of the 48 students nominated paragraphs as a goal on their planning templates, around one-quarter of the Year 2 students demonstrated the use of paragraphs in their writing sample. Among the other year groups, paragraphs featured prominently as a forethought consideration. For example, almost half of the Year 6 planning templates explicitly stated paragraphs as a goal. In respect of self-reflection, none of the Year 6 students nominated their use of paragraphs as a particular strength they demonstrated in the assessment: by contrast, three of the Year 4 students did.

Sentence structure

The planning templates indicated that students intended to pay attention to sentence structure when writing their text. In Year 2, one-quarter of the students made notes relating to checking their sentence structure on their checklists of goals to keep in mind. In Year 4, almost three-quarters of the students' planning templates indicated that the students would give attention to sentence structure, with around two-fifths explicitly stating intent to demonstrate variety of sentence construction: in other words, to 'make sentences interesting' by 'using different sentence starters', as one student expressed it in their planning template. In Year 6, a somewhat different focus on sentence structure was evident. In total, the 38 Year 6 templates featured 102 sentence structure goals. In the self-reflection phase of the project, around a tenth of Year 6 students identified their use of grammar as the feature of their writing they were the most pleased with.

Punctuation

Students across the three year levels identified punctuation goals on their planning templates. Overall, just under one-fifth of the Year 2 planning templates contained punctuation goals, which the students wrote down as part of the forethought step of the learning process. However, in the self-reflection section that students completed after they had finished the writing project, just under two-fifths identified punctuation as an area that the student thought was particularly successful or which they needed to improve. Punctuation also featured in the Year 4 and Year 6 templates, both as stated sub-goals as well as in the self-reflection.

Spelling

The spelling patterns in the writing rubric that we utilised in the study are divided into four groups: *simple, common, difficult* and *challenging* words (ACARA 2020) and cover a range of scores from 0 to 6. The higher scores require students to employ precise words and demonstrate accuracy when spelling words with complex spelling patterns. As such, this category is connected to the Vocabulary category. However, it is possible for students to achieve a high score in Vocabulary if they use carefully crafted words, irrespective of whether the spelling is correct. By contrast, the criteria of Spelling require competence in accurate spelling and complexity in word choices. The students' writing samples demonstrated that the majority of the Year 4 and Year 6 students correctly spelled most simple and common words. In addition, the Year 6 students demonstrated the correct spelling of some difficult words. It was interesting to note that spelling also featured in some of the interviews, such as in the following segment from the follow-up interview with two Year 6 students:

> Q: How do you judge if you are a good writer or not?
>
> Frances: Well, … by the punctuation, spelling and … [pausing]
>
> Q: What about you, Jeremy?
>
> Jeremy: Well, if you're a good writer you can really engage the audience. You can really engage the people who are reading; and make them want to keep reading to find out what's happening. That's what I like.
>
> Q: And do you find that you can read text even if it isn't perfect in spelling and punctuation? Do you still get engaged as a reader?
>
> Jeremy: Yes, if it is a good story. If it's *Harry Potter* and it has a few spelling mistakes and a few punctuation mistakes, I would still like to read it.

Discussion

In this section, I will discuss the findings from the analysis in relation to the purpose of self-assessment and the notion of change and agency. As part of this, it is important to consider the students' and teachers' influence on how the self-assessment process was implemented in the participating classes. As acknowledged in the Methodology section, the participating teachers represented a diverse group. Consequently, it is not surprising that the study revealed clear differences in how teachers scaffolded their students' development of learning strategies. When comparing the teachers' approaches to scaffolding self-assessment in their classes, three elements – time, confidence and experience – stand out. From an intelligent accountability stance, whereby assessment evidence is regarded as an indicator of effective learning that can enable students and teachers to confidently judge what has been learnt and to take the appropriate educational steps (O' Neill 2013), this is noteworthy and warrants further examination.

With regard to time, when students filled out their planning templates, the teachers in all three year levels appeared to allow a similar amount of time for the forethought phase; However, clear differences emerged in the later phases, in terms of supporting students with implementing their identified goals and strategies, with which they would monitor

and regulate their learning (Andrade and Brookhart 2016a, 2016b; Cleary and Labuhn 2013; Harris and Gavin 2018; Meusen-Beekman, Brinke, and Henny 2016) and persist. For example, all three Year 6 teachers commented that the writing project had required teaching time explicitly to scaffold students to develop the skills needed to monitor and regulate their learning. Crucially, this had taken longer than they had anticipated, as described below in an email from Monica:

> It really helped to have the assessment criteria (outcomes) that they had written themselves to refer back to. I regularly checked that the students had referred back to their outcomes. I said at the beginning that we would work on the project for three weeks, but I have found that in two weeks the majority of the kids have only done their planning and their written copy. I am not sure at this stage if the students will be able to complete the project in three weeks as originally planned.

None of the three Year 6 teachers expressed concern about this: rather, they commented how they could see that the students were engaged in deep and meaningful learning, in which they were motivated to persist with the learning task of meeting their set goals (Fletcher 2016; Panadero, Jonsson, and Strijbos 2016). As teachers, they trusted their own judgement and reasoned that, although the process was more time-consuming than anticipated, it was of benefit to the students' learning. In a separate follow-up email after the writing project had finished, the same teacher reflected:

> Most of the students prepared and presented wonderful writing projects. The projects that were outstanding were the ones where the students took time to prepare their writing projects: e.g. [Joe] and [Jack] with their video on how to prepare for a Nerf war; [Tilly] and [Georgia] with their scrap books [fictional recounts]; and [Sarah] with a PowerPoint presentation. [James], [Dylan] and [Zach] did a puppet show. [Claire] wrote an excellent story and presented it on a website. [. . .]. The project took longer than expected. We spent practically the whole term on the project. I do not think it could have been done any faster. [. . .] As mentioned before, I thoroughly enjoyed the writing project and will definitely do it again next year.

Monica's comments suggest that students had followed through from *forethought* to *performance* in terms of engaging their target audience, which – as the planning templates had indicated – were mainly children or teenagers. Her comments also indicate a level of confidence in her own judgement as a teacher. This differs from the Year 4 teachers, who had less experience and who, in their interviews, expressed concern about having time to fit in the curriculum. Consequently, the writing process in their classes progressed at pace through the various stages. For example, in Sam's Year 4 class, the project and planning template was introduced in one lesson. The writing session followed on a different day, but the writing session was conducted in one lesson, in line with the actual NAPLAN testing format, in which students have 50 minutes in total to construct their writing sample. Thus, Sam used the assessment as a snapshot of students' learning, rather than as a deep learning process. While the students still self-assessed and made choices in respect to what texts they would write, these choices were strongly influenced by the time limitations placed on the performance phase.

Through the lens of intelligent accountability (Sahlberg 2007; O'Neil 2013; Klenowski 2009) and the formative nature of self-assessment (Andrade 2019; Bennett 2011), Sam may still have used the students' writing to judge what students had – or had not yet –

learnt, to inform the appropriate educational next steps. If so, unlike Monica with her Year 6 class, this was not, though, done during the *process* of students engaging in the writing project. It was also evident that Alex, the other Year 4 teacher, adopted a more summative approach to the project. For example, comments in the follow-up interview suggested a focus on performance goals by drawing attention to results, rather than using the goals set as part of the self-assessment process to help students monitor their understanding (Andrade and Brookhart 2016a, Andrade 2019; Brown and Harris 2014) and direct their learning (Hargreaves 2014):

> Q: Do you think that it made them aware of the learning outcomes, the whole exercise?
>
> Alex: I don't know. I don't know, maybe I didn't push it enough. Because I did give it to them the last week, the last thing. But I did try and say: this is what I am marking you on, so this is what you need to show . . .

In the same follow-up interview, Alex reflected that the students had found the planning process challenging. In particular, several students had found it difficult to understand that the planning template was intended to help them develop a checklist of what to keep in mind in the writing project, as owners of their learning process (Absolum et al. 2009; Bennett 2011; Dann 2002; Fletcher 2016), rather than a template on which to construct writing drafts. Accounts from the Year 2 teachers also suggested that *time, confidence* and *experience* were key factors that impacted how they used assessment evidence as an indicator of how students employed learning strategies, in order to judge what has been learnt and to take the appropriate educational steps (O' Neill 2013). Like their Year 4 colleagues, the Year 2 teachers had less teaching experience than the Year 6 teachers. However, in terms of the level of confidence and time management, there was evidence that their teaching practice had been in response to the students' set goals and ownership of their learning process (Absolum et al. 2009; Bennett 2011; Dann 2002; Fletcher 2016). For example, Maria, one of the Year 2 teachers, described how her students had taken the initiative to seek feedback from her, which, in turn *'showed me, you know, what I need to cover a bit more, as a teacher'*. In her follow-up interview, she noted how students sought her help as part of monitoring and regulating their learning (Fletcher 2018b):

> Q: . . . Did the kids seem aware of what they needed to work on?
>
> Maria: Yeah, Yeah. Uhm . . . And I think that's why they often came up to me to check, because they know that's something . . . it's an area that they need to work on.

As outlined in the findings earlier in this paper, the data sets indicated that students did not only focus on a singular area to work on in their writing. In fact, they gave attention to developing their competence as writers across a whole range of aspects represented in the writing rubrics: i.e. text structure, ideas, vocabulary, cohesion, paragraphing, sentence structure and punctuation.

Emma, the other Year 2 teacher, also noted an increase in help-seeking behaviour among her students. In a follow-up email, she noted:

> During the project the students were approaching me more for help and feedback, as it was a new concept of writing. The responsibility was placed on them, so they were asking for confirmation that what they were doing was correct.

Two slightly different forms of feedback could be distinguished from the teachers' accounts. Feedback was sometimes initiated by students seeking help from their teacher (Fletcher 2018b) during the learning process, when there was an opportunity for students to adjust their learning (Andrade 2019; Bennett 2011; Sadler 1998). This student-initiated feedback appeared in the *forethought* phase and during the *performance* phase, as they were in the process of developing competence across a range of skill foci as writers. Alternatively, feedback occurred as a result of the teachers interpreting students' planning templates or drafts, as judgements about how students employed learning strategies and developed competence as writers. The teachers then used this evidence as feedback to inform their next teaching steps (Black and Wiliam 2009; O' Neill 2013).

Limitations

The study presented here is necessarily limited in aims and scope, as it is a practitioner case study based in one school setting; there is no intention to generalise. Furthermore, as discussed above, there were clear differences in how the teachers implemented the writing projects in their classes. However, the intention from the outset was to gain a rich understanding of the ways in which teachers in this setting were working to develop a culture of self-assessment in their classes, through the use of the self-assessment planning template.

Conclusions

This small-scale practitioner-research case study into the use of self-assessment highlights its potential as a meaningful classroom assessment approach and also draws attention to the need for future research to investigate how it can best be utilised to support teaching and learning. The aim of this article was to explore the use of a self-assessment planning template, which was developed collaboratively by the researcher and the teachers, as a means to build students' self-assessment capabilities. The study demonstrated the ways in which rubrics from a large-scale assessment programme, offering detailed descriptors of student progression in writing, could be used as a basis for self-assessment within the classroom. It is hoped that this report of a study focused on a formative, student-centred approach to learning will be of interest to educators in other settings internationally who are also exploring the potential of self-assessment. Overall, the study draws attention to the importance of assessment evidence being used by the student *and* the teacher to make informed judgements about what has been learnt, and crucially, to use this process to determine the appropriate next steps in the learning journey.

Notes

1. https://www.education.gov.au/national-assessment-program-literacy-and-numeracy.
2. It should be noted that, for the purposes of scaled image reproduction of the planning template in this article, the font used in Figure 1 and Figure 2 differs from that used in the actual Year 2 planning template. The Year 2 template's original style of font, Victorian Modern Cursive, is the font used to model handwriting in the Northern Territory, and therefore was

familiar to the students in the study. Therefore, Figure 1 and 2 illustrate the planning template pages but do not represent a facsimile of the planning template instrument used in the study.

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