



# 13

## Building a Strong Assessment Culture in Schools: Ensuring Effective Learning and Teaching

Dr. Dennis Alonzo & E/Prof.  
Chris Davison Teacher Education  
and Development



# Research Brief

## What is the problem?

Teacher assessment practices used to support learning are the most influential interventions in improving student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1999; Hattie, 2008).

However, teacher assessment for learning literacy remains relatively low. However, teachers' assessment knowledge and skills, known as assessment literacy, remains relatively low (Davison & Michell, 2014), and their development is influenced by structural, organisational, social and behavioral factors (Alonzo, Leverett, & Obsioma, 2021) in ways that are not well-known.

Research suggests successful implementation of assessment literacy development programs requires the use of the principles of effective assessment practice to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate teacher assessment literacy (Davison, 2013), but in ways that are highly contextualised to the specific assessment system.

### How do we define teacher assessment for learning literacy?

- Teacher assessment literacy accounts for "knowledge and skills in making highly contextualised, fair, consistent and trustworthy assessment decisions to inform learning and teaching to effectively support both students and teachers' professional learning. The aim of teachers is building on students' and other stakeholders' capabilities and confidence to take an active role in assessment, learning and teaching activities to enable and provide the needed support for more effective learning (Alonzo, 2016, p. 58).

- In this definition, teachers' assessment knowledge and skills include: developing and implementing various assessment strategies (Teachers as Assessors), using assessment information to plan learning and teaching activities (Teachers as Pedagogy Experts); using assessment to ensure high level of student motivation (Teachers as Motivators); engaging students in assessment (Teachers as Student Partners); reflecting on their assessment experience to identify their professional development needs (Teachers as Teacher Learners); and ensuring the assessment literacy of parents/carers and the community in general (Teachers as Stakeholder Partners)

We view teachers' skills in using assessment as the central unifying process of all learning and teaching activities. The daily decisions made by teachers to improve learning are informed by a range of assessment information about student learning characteristics, progress and needs, as well as by information from other stakeholders such as parents and school leaders.

The definition of teacher assessment literacy must address the inconsistencies both in the understanding and the actual practices amongst teachers of what constitutes sound assessment practices (Davison & Leung, 2009; Shepard, 2006). Ideally, teachers should have a common understanding of effective assessment practices.

However, in reality teachers have different views and needs as influenced by a range of factors. Davison (2004) has emphasised that in order to resolve conflicts in teachers' needs in assessment literacy, school systems should prioritise the enhancement of teachers' assessment skills.

Although the concept of using assessment to support student learning has significantly developed over time, there are some important aspects that are poorly theorised. Teacher and student interactions in the classroom require three most important modifications for effective assessment implementation namely: linguistic, cultural and pedagogical. The context-driven and evolving nature of assessment requires a constant exploration and configuration of approaches and practices.

# The Current Conceptualisation of Assessment

1971

## Wave 1: Adoption, Dichotomisation and Formalisation Formative and summative distinction developed by

- Formative and summative distinction developed by Scriven (1967) replaced evaluation with assessment (Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971)
- The distinguishing features of summative assessment (SA) versus formative assessment (FA) described including the purpose and timing of assessments and the interpretability of data gathered by test items.
- The distinction between FA and SA formalized by titler Ramaprasad (1983), who puts feedback as the central feature of FA.

1989 - 2005

## Wave 2: Complexification and Exploration

- The UK Assessment Reform Group (ARG) commissioned Black and Wiliam (1989) meta-analysis of over 250 studies showing the powerful effects of formative assessment in improving student learning and the benefits it had for low performing students.
- Assessment for learning was formally defined by ARG as “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there”.
- The work of ARG in promoting the concept of AfL received significant attention in many educational systems and became the basis for their assessment reform.
- The attention received by AfL and the continuous promotion of Black and Wiliam and Black et al. of FA created some confusion amongst teachers and researchers.

- Studies show that there are powerful interactions between SA and FA
- Researchers tried to gather evidence to show that SA raises standards, but what was also highlighted was its negative effects in limiting learning (W. Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003), narrowing the curriculum (Johnston & McClune, 2000; Reay & William, 1999) and compromising teaching (Gordon & Reese, 1997; Leonard & Davey, 2001; Pollard, Triggs, Broadfoot, Mcness, & Osborn, 2002; Shepard, 2000)

2005 - and onwards

## Wave 3: Period of Realisation and Reconciliation

- SA and FA were seen as mutually supporting each other’s purposes - the role and value of SA
- Stiggins (2005) argued that AfL should be used as a broader concept including both FA and SA, with all assessments used not only to inform teaching, but also to help students with their own learning by shifting the focus from the nature of the assessments to the quality of conversations with students about the learning steps to achieve their learning outcomes.
- Teacher assessment practice are seen as a continuum from in-class contingent formative assessment to most formal summative assessment but the results are used for formative purposes (Davison, 2007).
- The distinction made between formative and summative assessments is now seen as irrelevant when conceptualised within the broader model of pedagogy (Black, 2017; Black & Wiliam, 2018).
- Black and Wiliam (2018) emphasise that the distinction between FA and SA “is not useful because all assessment would be about producing valid inferences about students (p.570).” Black (2017) and Masters (2015) advocate that the terms summative and formative should be replaced with the overall term ‘assessment’ to align all assessment practices with the common goal of evaluating and improving student learning.

# Our Research

## Supporting System Level Assessment Reforms

- We have worked with educational systems and schools nationally and internationally to lead their assessment reforms focused on articulating policies, developing assessment resources, implementing professional development, and changing teachers' beliefs and practices. We worked with the Ministry of Education of Brunei to change the philosophical and cultural beliefs underpinning their assessment culture.

With colleagues at the University of Hong Kong, we completed the research and development of a range of oral school-based assessment initiatives for the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, and completed extensive consultancies on the development of teacher assessment literacy in Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, China and the Philippines. In Australia, we have developed an extensive online resource for teachers of primary and secondary level students who are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) funded by the Federal government and the three Victorian school systems. We also provided advice to many other educational bureaucracies including England, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore on integrating assessment for learning in their curricula.

## Building a Strong Assessment Culture in Schools

- We provide support for individual schools to build a school-based assessment culture. We engage with schools by co-designing and evaluating long-term professional development programs and providing short-term training and input.

# Our Assessment Literacy Tools

We have developed, trialed and evaluated a range of tools in collaboration with educational systems both in Australia and internationally to support teachers to enhance their assessment knowledge and skills. These tools were developed using both theoretical and empirical approaches.

## [Teacher Assessment for Learning Literacy Tool](#)

This tool is part of a process designed to help teachers improve their *Assessment for Learning* (AfL) literacy in improving student learning and achievement. This tool can be used for teachers' self and peer assessment and for school leader's direct assessment.

## [EAL Teachers' Assessment for Learning Literacy Tool](#)

This assessment instrument is part of a process designed to help EAL teachers improve assessment for learning literacy with the ultimate aim of enhancing student English as an additional language learning.

## [Teacher Beliefs about Assessment](#)

This is a context-driven tool designed to measure teachers' assessment beliefs in various domains: assessment for professional learning, for motivation, for measurement, for planning, for engagement, for learning, for evaluation, for norm-referencing and for instructional accountability.

## [The Academics' Standards-based Assessment Literacy Tool](#)

This is designed to support academics to improve their standards-based assessment literacy. The tool contains criteria and three levels of standards, which can be used to measure performance and could identify the gap between the person's current level of ability and the desired performance.

## [Tools to Enhance Assessment Literacy for Teachers of English as an Additional Language \(EAL\)](#)

An online resource for teachers of primary and secondary level students who are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Australia. It brings together a range of tools and advice for the assessment and reporting of the English language proficiency and progress of students within an 'assessment for learning' framework.

## A Framework for Strong Assessment Culture

In our many years of research, we have discovered that to optimise the impact of assessment to students' outcomes, a strong assessment culture in schools is needed where principals, teachers, parents and students are actively engaged in assessment reform.

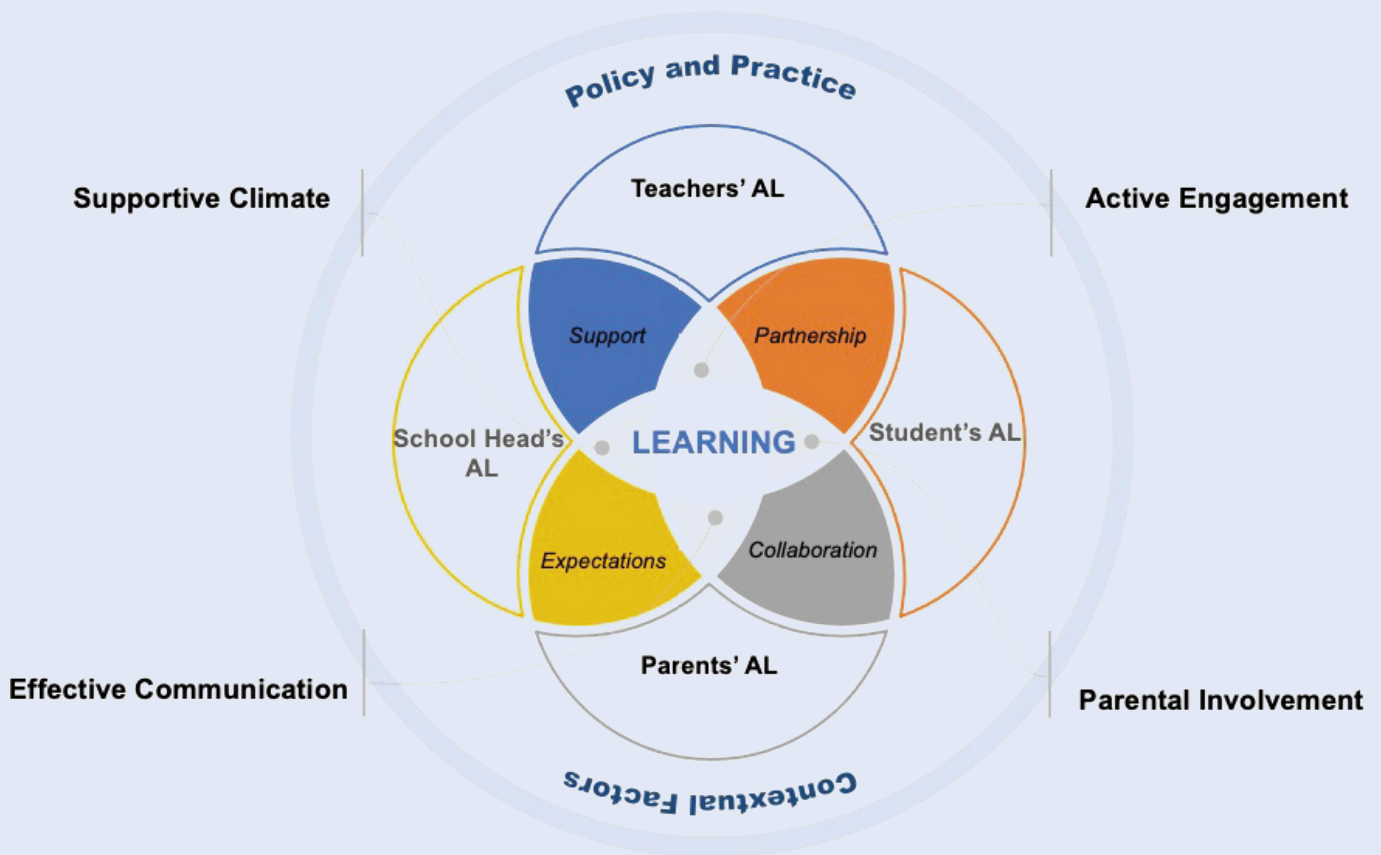


Figure 1. Our framework for building a strong assessment culture in schools showing the interactions of school heads, teachers, parents and students.

### Why this framework?

At the centre of this framework is effective learning. This can only be achieved if principals, teachers, parents and students have sufficient level of assessment literacy to take active role and perform their assessment responsibilities. However, the effectiveness of assessment is context-dependent, operating within the constraints of existing educational policy and practice.

## About the Researchers



### Dennis Alonzo

Dennis Alonzo has an extensive track record in establishing the dimensions of various constructs. He has developed the teacher assessment for learning literacy tool, findings from which were used to develop the empirically-driven framework for defining and describing teacher assessment for learning literacy. The tool supports teachers to build strong assessment literacy and has been contextualised for EAL/D teachers and for higher education. As an ECR, he has been involved in many national and international research projects totally ~\$2M.



### Chris Davison

Chris Davison is a specialist in language education and school-based assessment. She has completed the research and development of a range of school-based assessment initiatives for the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, the Ministries of Education in Singapore and in Brunei. She also led a multimillion dollar project researching and developing an online assessment resource centre for assessing and teaching EAL learners in Victorian schools, funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET), Catholic Education and Independent Schools Victoria.





**UNSW**  
SYDNEY

High Street, Kensington NSW 2052

+61 2 9385 1000

[unsw.edu.au](http://unsw.edu.au)

 @unsw

 @unsw

 @unsw

 UNSW

<https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/education>

### Contact

Dr. Dennis Alonzo  
[d.alonzo@unsw.edu.au](mailto:d.alonzo@unsw.edu.au)

### For more information

Requests for further information and/or media enquiries can be directed to the contact author for the Research Brief.

This Research Brief is published under the responsibility of the School of Education Research Committee at UNSW Sydney. The opinions expressed and the arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of UNSW Sydney. You can copy, download or print this Research Brief for your own use, and you can include excerpts in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgement of School of Education Research Brief and its author(s) as source and copyright owner is given.

### Looking for further study?

The teacher education and development research community offers a suite of study options targeted at professional educators looking to better understand, critique, and design curriculum and assessment. You will be mentored by a team of renowned academics actively engaged in making a real-world impact in curriculum and assessment on a national and global scale. If this sounds like something for you, consider these related programs:

Master of Curriculum and Assessment | Doctor of Education | Doctor of Philosophy