Uncovering 'unwelcome truths' through student voice: Teacher inquiry into agency and student assessment literacy

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Abstract

Learner agency is often seen unproblematically as an integral aspect of '21st century lifelong learning'. Agency and instrumentalist forms of teacher professional development are problematised through this qualitative case study that explores a teacher's inquiry into assessment for learning practices. This article illustrates how 'Teaching as Inquiry' can be located as either a process that is purely technicist or replete with potential for teachers to engage with 'unwelcome truths'. Student voice data that reveals 'unwelcome truths' can provide a catalyst for teacher reflection on student positioning in learning relationships. Findings focus on practices of assessment for learning, assessment literacy, agency as a neoliberal construction and the need to interrogate power relations in the classroom for student agency to flourish. Issues around student voice and the democratic participation of students in schooling improvement are discussed. Teaching as Inquiry, that explicitly targets wider non-instrumental goals assocated with teacher learning, can be a critical process that addresses the growth of assessment literacy and learner agency in classrooms. It can transcend a linear obsession with easily measured quantifable shifts in student achievement data.

Key words

agency; teacher inquiry; teacher professional learning; assessment for learning; assessment literacy, neoliberalism

Introduction

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It is well documented that we live in performative times where measurement is an integral aspect of monitoring student and teacher progress (Ball, 2013). This article presents a qualitative case study, positioned in a teacher professional learning and development inquiry framework, which highlights the potential for teacher inquiry to facilitate the telling of "unwelcome truths" (Kemmis, 2006, p. 474). The telling of 'unwelcome truths' can be seen as an important element of instructional change, enabling the development of a wider professional knowledge base and ongoing teacher professional identity formation (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015a). The central question for this article is how teachers can engage with unwelcome truths by targeting learner agency through practitioner inquiry into assessment for learning practices. Here, agency is defined broadly as a capacity to take action, an aspect integral to assessment for learning. We also recognise that engagement with asssessment for learning has become a "research epidemic" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 2) due to its promise of leverging increased student achievement (Black & William, 1998; Hopfenbeck & Stobart, 2015).

Assessment for learning can be defined as "part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance on-going learning" (Klenowski, 2009, p. 2). Embedded within this approach, is the complex element of learner agency. On the surface, an agentic learner is one who is capable, competent and can replicate and appropriate aspects of their culture through their talk and interactions with others thereby actively participating in the construction of their own social situations (Danby & Farrell, 2004). In this article, we recognise the importance of learners appropriating school norms and culture. Yet, we also trouble neoliberal conceptions that reduce agency to mere compliance within dominant schooling discourses around pedagogy and teacher professional development.

Shifts to define pedagogy and intensify teacher professional development can be

contextualised in the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2011). This global movement reflects the spread of policy ideas that include the standardisation of teaching and learning, a reductive focus on literacy and numeracy, an emphasis on curriculum prescription, the founding and promotion of education markets and the use of test-based accountability (Sellar, 2015). Across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, we see a discourse of global capitalism associated with an unrelenting 'arms race' in Education systems for systemic improvement (OECD, 2013). This competitive impetus manifests in both a drive for professional development and an obsession with international assessment practices, programs and policies.

Fuelling the global discourse of accountability, we see the interplay between global and national fields executed through OECD international schooling assessment mechanisms. Testing regimes like 'Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study' (TIMSS), 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA), the 'International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement' (IEA), and 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' (PIRLS), filter into national regimes, such as the 'National Assessment Program -Literacy and Numeracy' (NAPLAN) in Australia, 'National Standards' in NZ, 'Race to the Top' and 'Common Core State Standards' and 'Teacher Evaluation Systems' in the United States of America and 'Every Child Matters, Help Children Achieve More' and 'National Curriculum Assessment: Test Frameworks' in the United Kingdom.

Inherently linked with these international performance measures is the notion that teacher quality can be achieved through the mechanism of professional development.Within this paradigm, teachers are seen as instrumental to 'raising standards', which has led to the intensification of professional learning and development. This process is linked to the drive to leverage economic improvement through producing a labour force that is fit for purpose to address the knowledge economy. However, in this drive to improve the quality of instruction,

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it is possible to undermine the richness of quality teacher learning (Smardon & Charteris, 2012), undervalue teacher professionalism (Charteris, 2015a) and narrow conceptions of learner agency (Charteris, 2013).

This article commences with a contextualisation and critique of the New Zealand Curriculum context, in particular 'Teaching as Inquiry' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 35). It proceeds with a literature review of agency and learning, student voice and assessment for learning. A brief description of the design of the research is furnished. Against this background, findings are presented and discussed, focusing on practices of assessment for learning, agency as a neoliberal conception embedded in schooling improvement, and a consideration of classroom power relations as an important aspect of teacher inquiry.

Professional learning and Teaching as Inquiry

With the pressures of increased accountability, performance cultures and the control of teacher activity through the scope and remit of teaching standards, new approaches are required that enable teachers to "collectively and individually address those in power to make it clear that a top-down approach is simply not working, nor, in principle, is it likely to work" (Sachs, 2016, p. 414). Timperley (2011a) makes the distinction that professional development refers to "activities that develop professional skills, knowledge and expertise" and professional learning pertains to "changes in the capacity for practice and / or changes in actual practice" (p. 4). Although she prefers to combine these terms as professional learning and development, we see that there is an important distinction to be made. Recognising the loaded and instrumental nature of teacher professional development, we make a distinction between professional development and professional learning, troubling simplistic notions of 'improvement' in favour of a critically engaged praxis framework for inquiry (Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2016). As Sachs (2016) points out, a teacher learning approach is transformative in its intent, authentic in its recognition of complexity, and political in its

advocacy for " change from a variety of perspectives" (p. 420). A transformative view of teacher learning promotes a view of teachers as "creative developers of curriculum and innovative pedagogues" (Mockler, 2005, p. 742). Professional learning is sustained by teachers' own inquiry and is proactive rather than based on systemic or "managerial lines of action that decide what teachers need to know and do". (Long, 2012, p.48)

> A focus on 'learning' over 'development' has the "potential for more engaging and sustained learning that facilitates change, as teachers are learning over longer periods of time with the support of their colleagues on areas of mutual interest for the improvement of pedagogy and student learning outcomes … [Further,] by focusing inquiry on teachers' own pedagogy in small groups of collaborative practice, the power of professional learning for change and curriculum renewal can be fully realised. (Long, 2012, p.48)

Teaching as Inquiry has been mandated education policy since 2007 in NZ (Ministry of Education, 2007). Through Teaching as Inquiry, the NZ Ministry of Education (MoE) has been able to institutionalise action research practices in New Zealand schools. A cyclical process of inquiring into changing pedagogy and determining next steps for student learning, the Teaching as Inquiry cycle focuses on three question: "What is the impact of the teaching and learning?" "What do students need to learn?" and "What do I need to know and do?" (MoE, 2007, p. 35). Teaching as Inquiry promotes continuous improvement and a focus on quantifiable student achievement among the teaching labourforce. The model provides a systematic process that is mandated for use in NZ classrooms and in professional development groups. With a focus on the impact of teaching on student achievement outcomes, the policy provides a conduit that enables the global politics of assessment to filter into classrooms. The cycles of Teaching as Inquiry are outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum document as a process of evidenced-based decision making (MoE, 2007).

As a form of action research, Teaching as Inquiry has been critiqued for its primarily individualistic focus and omission of criticality (Benade, 2015). Kemmis (2006), for example,

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advocates schooling practices that are critical and transformative. He identifies five characteristics of inadequate action research that can be applied as a yardstick to the operationalisation of Teaching as Inquiry. We frame these charateristics as questions for practitioners.

- Is it reductive in focus, aiming only at improving techniques of teaching?

- Is it purely aimed at increasing efficiency without consideration for the social, cultural, discursive, and material-economic significance of practices?

- Does it solely target the implementation of government policies and programs?

- Does it exclude the perspectives of those stakeholders immediately involved with the practice (for example parents/caregivers and students themselves)?

- Is it conducted in isolation without communication with others whose lives are affected by it?

Picking up on the third question above, a narrow interpretation of Teaching as Inquiry for the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007), can be critiqued for its instrumentalist focus on conformity. Kemmis (2006) argues that when intentions, their presuppositions, and their frameworks are uncritically adopted, it is unlikely that the bodies of evidence generated are capable of challenging existing modes of schooling. "It is likely to be and to produce conformity and compliance to authority rather than a critical evaluation, asking uncomfortable questions about the quality of education offered in a school or school system" (p. 460). A powerful political lever that is detailed and circulated through both texts and artefacts (templates, models etc), Teaching as Inquiry can be interpreted in complex and sophisticated ways (Maguire, Braun & Ball, 2015). It promotes continuous improvement and a focus on quantifiable student achievement among the teaching labourforce. The model provides a systematic process that is mandated for use in NZ classrooms and in professional learning groups. With a focus on the impact of teaching on student achievement outcomes, the

policy provides a conduit that enables the global politics of assessment to filter into classrooms. The cycles of Teaching as Inquiry are outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum document as a process of evidenced-based decision making (MoE, 2007).

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Figure 1. The New Zealand Curriculum 'Teaching as Inquiry' diagram. (MoE, 2007, p. 35)

Policy implementation is never a simple transmission process. The Teaching as Inquiry policy, in particular, comprised the reculturing of teacher professional learning and classroom pedagogy to incorporate cycles of inquiry. NZ teachers are required to enact techniques that make students visible and productive. Similarly, they are also emeshed within a disciplinary programme of visibility and production that is always incomplete (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). Therefore, the pedagogical mandate in the New Zealand Curriculum is not a static package, which is to be "learned" or implemented, rather it requires an on going investment in those things that enable teachers to grapple with the transformations of ideas and behaviour (Darling-Hammond 2006).

Muijs et al. (2014) highlight the importance of teacher inquiry in their conception of 'state of the art' professional development. "Teachers together frame their own learning by identifying goals for both themselves and their students; creating partnerships with those with expertise such as researchers to ensure their learning is focused and likely to achieve the desired goals" (Muijs et al., 2014, p. 249). Inquiry of this nature involves questioning, reflection, decision-making and using data and evidence. While it is impossible to mandate genuine and authentic curiousity, and there is messiness and complexity in teacher professional learning contexts, it is important to acknowledge that teacher learning is more than a technicist activity with a focus on school managerialism and schooling efficiency. Thus, teacher inquiry also reflects "a way of professional being" (Reid, 2004, p. 5). It can involve a sense of criticality where

practitioners can read the politics of schooling and engage with agency as a concept that is embedded in schooling power dynamics (Charteris, 2013).

Agency and learning

Agency is an important aspect of learning (Charteris, 2016) and there has been increasing interest in it within the schooling sector (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015; Deakin Crick, Huang, Ahmed Shafi & Goldspink, 2015). In this article we analyse a practitioner inquiry into her classroom assessment for learning practices as an example of teacher agency that targets learner agency. Agency has been interpreted though a range of theoretical frameworks: realist social theory (Archer, 1995); structuration (Giddens, 1984); a chordal triad where temporality is connected to reflective choice (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998); a product of ecological conditions and circumstances (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta et al., 2015); and, as a discursively mediated construct (Davies, 2004).

For the purposes of this article, we argue that agency can be recognised as material and discursive acts where subjects contribute to their social constitution (Charteris, 2015a). Drawing on Davies (2004), agency is framed in relation to the powerful discourses (for example, behaviour management) that circulate in learning contexts. Learning is a social process and learner agency is influenced by the nature of social participation in classrooms. This approach contrasts problematic neoliberal definitions that frame learner agency as an innate property of the individual and implies that teachers can be seen to impart agency to their students as a form of individual empowerment (Gershon, 2011). Millei and Petersen (2015) note the "competent child" that is prominent within the neoliberal dominant behaviour discourse. The "competent child" is seen as a rational subject who makes the 'right' choice. She makes "a choice between acting in line with dominant discourses of being ' good' and 'behaving appropriately' or going against these" (Millei & Petersen, 2015, p. 22). Within dominant behaviour discourse, even freedom is regulated as self-regulated learners operate

within the parameters set by the teacher and it is the teacher's role to manage or control this self-regulation behaviour. We propose that a broader view of learning that acknowleges discursive complexity can support dynamic conceptualisation of assessment and learner agency.

Learner voice and assessment for learning

Agency is something that cannot be registered through simplistic classroom observation and therefore a student voice approach can provide further information in the form of a learner lens for teachers to reflect on and take pedagogic action. Theorised from social constructivist, social constructionist and post-structural perspectives (Fleming, 2015), the student voice movement positions students as possessing "unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate" (Mitra, 2014, p. 10). Emerging from "pupil voice" (in the United Kingdom and Australia) and "student voice" (in the United States and Canada), the first wave of voice literature appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s (Fielding, 1999; Cook-Sather, 2014).

Growing in recent years, there has been both interest in civic engagement and dialogic consultation (Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2015; Mayes & Groundwater-Smith, 2013) and links with personalising learning through authentic consultation with learners (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Whitty & Wisby, 2007; Bourke, 2016). Young people are located as active meaning makers capable of acting in their own interests and contributing unique and valuable perspectives on their experiences (Nelson 2015, p. 1). Although student voice can be seen as "a radical interruption to the normal asymmetries inherent in school relations" (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015b, p. 54) and can involve students as co-researchers in education settings (Mayes & Groundwater-Smith, 2013), it is beyond the scope of this research to investigate this correlation of 'student voice' and agency in depth. Rather the focus is on how

a teacher within an assessment for learning professional learning context engages with learner voice in an inquiry into her teaching.

Student participation is core to assessment for learning, particularly in a NZ context. Lodge (2008, p. 13) points out that, in assessing their own learning, young people are able to consider "criteria and strategies and relate present practice to future practice" (self assessment). Wiliam (2011) highlights the importance for teachers to activate students as the owners of their own learning and to encourage them to be instructional resources for one another (peer assessment). Learners proficient in self and peer assement are assessment literate. Assessment literacy incorporates a range of factors. Firstly, learners develop a purpose for learning and understand their learning trajectory. Secondly, there is an awareness of assessment processes. Thirdly, they can identify strengths and areas for improvement (Smith et al., 2013). Mindful that agency involves material and discursive acts, where subjects contribute to their social constitution, the writers locate learners at the heart of assessment. Thus assessment literacy is based on students' active collaboration with teachers to develop their capability to assess their own learning.

Having discussed Teaching as Inquiry, agency, learner voices, assessment for learning, and assessment literacy, there now follows an account of the research study and an analysis of student and teacher voices in relation to these theoretical concerns.

The case study

As an in-service teacher educator, one of the authors facilitated assessment for learning professional learning over four years with a group of NZ schools. The professional learning project aimed to assist teachers to give effect to the teacher inquiry aspect of the New Zealand Curriculum and assist with the embedding of assessment for learning in teaching practice. The wider research project was an investigation into learner agency across three classrooms in

a secondary school where assessment for learning was a professional learning focus. The case study approach, as described by Yin (2009), is used here is an attempt to illustrate teacher engagement with student voice. As written elsewhere (Charteris, 2015b), student voice in the NZ context has been a primary vehicle for assessment for learning feedback that assists teacher reflection and learning.

Both the students and teachers were a purposive sample of consenting participants from the regional and rural schools who participated in a professional development project. This article explores one teacher's response to a sample of this student voice during an interview. The researcher visited the class on at least four occasions over a one year period, talking with the students, gathering student voice data and having follow up conversations with the teacher. The interview, selected for this paper, was chosen because it highlights how teachers, through an encounter with unwelcome truths raised by student voice, can reflect on learner agency and assessment literacy. The follow up interview with the teacher covered theoretical material from the assessment for learning professional learning project. (The student and teacher have been given pseudonyms.)

Patrice is an experienced teacher. She had moved to the secondary school from a primary background and is observably respected by other members of staff who come into her classroom to view her practice as a model. As part of the assessment for learning professional learning taking place within the school, Patrice inquires into her teaching practice on an ongoing basis. Her inquiry is supported through deliberately scheduled bimonthly staff meetings throughout the school year. In Patrice's school there are quality learning circles (Lovett & Gilmore, 2003) operating where teachers meet regulary to discuss their inquiries into their teaching. Patrice's focus is on how she can foster peer and group assessment. The following is Patrice's reflection on student voice data from one student, Kate, that was gathered through an audio recording of a researcher interview with her during an English

lesson. Patrice had asked the researcher to ask her some questions to learn more about her perceptions of pedagogy in Patrice's class.

Kate's perception data was gathered through a range of questions put to her within the classroom setting. This was aimed to retain some contextual relevance to the specific lesson and Patrice's particular classroom environment. Developed by the University of Waikato 'Assess to Learn' team (Smardon & Bewley, 2007), the questions were familiar to Patrice. Kate was asked to share her perceptions regarding what she was learning (learning intention), why she perceived she was learning that particular content, how she would know that she had learnt the intended learning, what she thought she needed to improve on and what she thought helped her to learn. In the interview, further prompts were used to encourage Kate to elaborate on her responses. The voice collection was couched in such a way that Kate understood that her input would help Patrice reflect on and learn more about her teaching. Kate knew that her responses were to be shared with her teacher, Patrice.

The episode below focuses on a "practice analysis conversation" (Timperley, 2011b, p. 126) where a teacher engages with and makes sense of her own teacher inquiry data. Only one professional learning episode is chosen so that these deliberations can be explored in depth. The data illustrates Patrice's dialogic inquiry around a recorded in-class interview between Kate and a researcher. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2014) describe dialogic inquiry as "an educational approach that acknowledges the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, and an attitude for aquiring knowledge through communicative interactions" (p. 109). A dialogic protocol was established in the wider professional learning and development project that the analysis of student voice data was not an opportunity to deficit theorise what was lacking in the students' background or to blame the students for any 'unwelcome truths' that may emerge. Within the professional learning framework, the teachers' own analyses are prioritised over those of the reseacher. This is because the practice analysis conversations

(Timperley, 2011b) have a mutually agreed upon dual purpose –to contribute to the research and support the teachers' reflections on their practice. In particular, the emphasis of the professional learning reflective dialogue (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005) was on how the students theorised learning, how commensurate the students' perspectives were with their teacher' perspectives of assessment for learning discourse, and what actions the teachers could take to make the rationale for their pedagogy more explicit for students.

In this case study, Patrice's inquiry into her practice is centred around how she can foster peer and group assessment. During the professional learning session Patrice reflects on and interprets voice from four of her students. To provide an in-depth and detailed example of practice analysis, voice from one student is presented in this article. We note that the student and teacher data below is not necessarily indicative of the teacher's practice in absolute terms. It is a slice of data from a moment in time. It is reflective of not only the teacher/student relationship but is also embedded in the researcher/student interplay. The dynamic between Patrice and the researcher must also be acknowledged -as in a face to face meeting – the interview is co-produced in the space between participants. The students' descriptions of how they see learning happens in Patrice's classroom and how they think that they learn (their dominant conceptions of effective pedgaogy), provide feedback to Patrice to assist her to further support their learning. The episode provides an account of how Patrice interprets Kate's comments. The reflective dialogue undertaken with the researcher is a professional learning process of teacher feedback.

The following episode took place two months into the school year. Patrice listens to an audio recording of Kate speaking with the researcher during the in-class interview.The following dialogue provides an account of the reflective dialogue between Patrice and the researcher. It details Patrice's response to hearing a recording of Kate speaking about learning in her classroom.

Patrice's inquiry into learner agency

Patrice and the researcher sit at a table with a laptop in Patrice's classroom. It is lunchtime.

They listen to sections of an audio recording of the in-class student voice interview between

Kate and the researcher that has just taken place.

The recording commences:

> *Researcher: How does learning happen in your class?*
>
> *Kate: She writes the walt (learning intention) up. We follow what the walt says. She tells us what it means. She just teaches us. About the subject that we are learning.*

Patrice and the researcher pause the recording to discuss the student voice.

> *Researcher: What are you noticing about this student?*
>
> *Patrice: That she um -she has been really used to being told what to do. Its almost like she knows no other way. She is too scared to say ... I don't think she thinks that working with a partner and working with a group or finding out things - I don't think she thinks she is learning when she is doing these other activities ... She is a really neat kid. I picked her because she just sits there and doesn't say anything. And yet when she does produce learning it is really good. It surprises me a bit because she never volunteers answers. I don't know what she is thinking. What work, what learning she does produce is really very good ...*

Patrice and researcher listen to the next section of the student interview.

> *Researcher: How do you think you learn?*
>
> *Kate: Through partners. We do partners. We do group working. By myself.*
>
> *Researcher: How do you learn by yourself?*
>
> *Kate: Just write it in my book and practice what she teaches us.*
>
> *Researcher: Oh OK.*

Patrice and researcher resume dialogue.

> *Patrice: But that's good that she did come up with um -how do you think you learn - through partners. We do partners- we do group work.*

Patrice and researcher listen to next section of student interview.

> *Researcher: How do the comments your teacher makes about your learning help you?*
>
> *Kate: Um. She puts feedforward and feedbacks in our books and writes what we have to do and what we have already done.*
>
> *Researcher: Any other way Mrs Ohlsen's (Patrice) comments help you with your learning?*

I just try and do what she says.

Researcher: Who's in charge of your learning?

Kate: Mrs Ohlsen

Researcher: What do you think you need to do now to get better at interpreting static images. (An English learning intention.)

Kate: Just follow the instructions and just work co-operatively with my partners. Just remember everything she says.

Patrice and researcher resume dialogue.

Researcher: So who is in charge of her learning?

Patrice: It's quite scary though isn't it really.

Researcher: I am just wondering how children can learn to be more independent in the way that they seek it out and use it from different sources.

(Pause)

Researcher: What is your take on it?

Patrice: Its only term one ... so I am trying to carry on from last year–I really find that I have to model a lot before I just let them go full out and do their own and do partners ... But I really do think modeling is really important before I let them get into peer assessing and group assessing which we do lead onto next term.

Because in the first week I just found where the kids are at ... I was very surprised at how limited- they hadn't done a lot of peer or self assessment ... So I thought neat. This year I am going to get a whole class who would have a lot of skills and strategies that we looked at last year [in the schoolwide professional learning]. And they hadn't. And I was really disappointed. I thought oh OK! I thought I was just going to be able to carry on- but a lot of them had not done a lot of co-operative or group learning. They hadn't done much assessment. I had to go right back to –you know 'what is feedback' and 'feedforward' in those very first two weeks. And I found out how little they had actually done ...

And yet this is supposed to be the more capable class in year 9. And even getting them to self assess [is hard]. I mean they did look back in their books, you know how I have written my feedback and feedforward. But they had done very little of that either. And I am making a real generalisation here really. But this meant that not pulling back but trying to find a starting point- so we could all [progress]- without holding a couple back. Because I realised that there have been a couple[who knew] -but not at the stage where I thought they might be at really.

Assessment for learning and assessment literacy

Although it has become "feverishly spread into every discipline and professional field" and it may be becoming 'cold' as "saturation point" is reached in academic scholarship (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 2), we signal the continued importance of assessment for learning. As an open-ended divergent process (Pryor & Crossouard, 2010), it informs both teacher and student learning.

The professional learning dialogue was founded on Patrice's professional inquiry into assessment practices in her classroom. It is the beginning of the year and although Patrice has only had the class for a few weeks, she expects them to have a more advanced understanding of assessment for learning practices. She comments that although she has a couple of students who are proficient in assessment for learning practices of feedback and feedforward, for the most part the students are reliant on her for direction and she is disappointed about this. Kate's interpretation of assessment for learning is linear and compliance oriented. "*She writes the walt up. We follow what the walt says. She tells us what it means.*" This comment highlights a peril associated with formulaic approaches to assessment for learning associated with patterning like "We are learning to …" (Walt) (Clarke, Timperley & Hattie, 2003). Purposefulness and an understanding of their learning trajectory (Smith et al., 2013), are important aspects of student assessment literacy that may be overlooked.

Students can achieve learning outcomes, yet miss opportunities to agentically determine their own goals unless self and peer assessment have been explicitly introduced and taught, as Patrice describes. However, these skills, as Patrice points out in her comments on "*modelling*" and going back and teaching the students "*feedback and feedforward*", take time to embed. Processes of modelling, sourcing and using information to enhance learning, address a second aspect of assessment literacy; targeting student awareness of assessment processes (Smith et al., 2013). In seeking feedback, the students identify strengths and areas for improvement – a third aspect of assessment literacy (Smith et al., 2013).

Patrice's observation of transitions across year groups raises the importance of systemic flow- where assessment for learning practices can be sustained so that that enculturation into assessment literacy is smoother because it is consistent across classrooms. Another unwelcome truth (Kemmis 2006) emerged when Patrice inquired into her year nine students' assessment literacy (making an assumption about their ability as a high achieving class), she found that the assessment knowledge and skills she had hoped they would come with were not there for the majority of students. *"So I thought neat. This year I am going to get a whole class that would have a lot of skills and strategies that we looked at last year … And they hadn't. And I was really disappointed."*

Patrice's comments about the lack of cross-classroom flow aligns with Blanchard's (2008) point that there is a need to promote classroom and institutional cultures of transparency and interactivity. Assessment practices are cumulative and can be built up progressively between classes. Patrice's comment draws attention to the importance for assessment for learning practices to align across classrooms. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to discuss the effectiveness of organisational structures, in Patrice's school collegial dialogue takes place through quality learning circles (QLC). QLC are where all the teachers met regularly to discuss their inquiries into their teaching (Lovett & Gilmore, 2003). Patrice meets with colleagues on an ongoing basis to critically surface 'unwelcome truths' (Kemmis 2006). There, she has an opportunity to discuss her students' levels of assessment literacy and what can be done at classroom and institution levels.

Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015b) highlight that such an inquiring approach to teaching and learning can be transformative. Inquiry can open the door to "professional formation and (real) development, contribut[ing] to local knowledge production, stimulat[ing] teachers' curiosity about learning, and foster[ing] dynamic, collaborative learning communities" (p. 612). They emphasise that a willingness and ability to critique can enable

the surfacing of 'unwelcome truths' and "genuine professional discourse and reorientation of practice as the true measures of success" (p. 612).

Teaching as Inquiry, student voice, and agency

On the basis of Kate's comments to the researcher, Patrice focuses on the importance of self and peer assessment as a significant area for development in her classroom. We can see the Teaching as Inquiry (MoE, 2007) cycles of inquiry in evidence here. The student voices afford Patrice an opportunity to engage with classroom evidence that is linked with the impact of teaching in her classroom. On the basis of her analysis, she determines what the students need to learn and the associated actions she can take to build assessment literacy. This type of Teaching as Inquiry (MoE, 2007) escapes a technicist interpretation because it is unhinged from exclusive linear processes of mining student achievement data and making deductive links with practice. During the reflective dialogue, Patrice undertakes a critical engagement with qualitative classroom data that enabled transformational opportunities to engage with new ideas and contemplate new behaviour (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This is demonstrated by Patrice reflecting on her past practice to consider her next steps. *"… [T]his meant … not pulling back but trying to find a starting point- so we could all [progress]".* Through Teaching as Inquiry, Patrice specifically targeted assessment literacy capacity building with her students. Rather than being driven by a measurement orientation, where there is a narrow and exclusive focus on test based accountability, Patrice aims to strengthen her learners' learning capabilities.

Kate does appropriate the powerful discourses in her context. We can see evidence of her proficiency in the discourse of compliance with authority figures and the assessment for learning discourse in that she uses the metalanguage – *"Walt"*. Kate's comment and Patrice's response alerts us to the issue of conflating agency with rule following. It is important not to confuse learner agency with neoliberal compliance, where students appear to be 'self

managing' on the surface but are dependent on their teacher's direction. Kate's comments suggests that, at that moment of the researcher /student dialogue, she does not position herself agentically within the context of her own learning. Kate observes that Patrice is in charge of her learning and she just needs to *"follow the instructions"* and *"remember everything [Patrice]says."* Patrice describes Kate's focus and possible reliance on her direction as *"scary",* suggesting a further 'unwelcome truth'.

Although Kate does speak openly with the researcher, there are several restrictions that may influence the interaction. Firstly, there may be an impetus for Kate to be seen as 'good' that underpins her comments. It is possible that Kate portrays both her teacher and herself in accordance with a 'compliance discourse' so that they are presented as a 'good teacher' and a 'good student' (Davies, 2000) to the researcher. Although this may not be what Patrice wants to hear, this type of student voice can assist teachers to learn more about their students' perceptions and the power relations in classrooms that discursively constitute students as passive learners. Secondly, the role of the researcher in conversation with Kate was unintentionally but inescapably imbalanced -an adult and child dynamic that extends from the imbalanced power relation between adult teacher and child student that was an inherent limitation within the original research design. In his critique of the power structures associated with student voice, Fielding (2004) observed that listening to voice may not be in itself either empowering or liberating for the students concerned. He writes, "there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together" (p. 309). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the realities of power differentials, the importance of questioning the extent those who are powerful are reaffirmed in their superiority, and the importance of being open to criticism (Fielding, 2004). In this instance there is no question that the teacher and researcher were the more powerful in the adult-child

relationship. Nevertheless, through her conversation with the researcher Patrice was open to self-critique through student voice.

It is beyond the scope of the study to pursue how Patrice followed up the student interview. Therefore, we do not know whether she learned more about Kate's perspective on her role in her learning and included her in decision-making to strengthen her capacity as a learner. Another limitation to the work is the fraught nature of adults discussing voice in the absence of students. It locates the students passively and constructs a power relationship where students are objectified (Goodman, Hoagland, Pierre-Toussaint, Rodriguez & Sanabria, 2011). This approach however, was taken to mitigate the possible power imbalances of situating a young person with two adults, which can be daunting for the young person. The fragmentary 'of the moment' nature of student voice should also be noted. Kate's voice was contextually positioned within the specific lesson and, as such, was a snapshot in time.

As demonstrated in the data above, student voice can reveal powerful schooling discourses. For instance, it must be noted that the neoliberal approach underpinning the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2011) and aligned with the international testing regimes, introduced at the outset of this article, would suggest that Kate should take responsibility and ownership of her learning –owning both her successes and failures. The data clearly shows that the researcher too echoed neoliberal overtones in her questioning of both the student and the teacher when she asked about being "in charge" of learning. As this paper has shown however, it is simplistic to think that students should own both success and failure when student achievement can be associated with many factors (in-school and beyond). Agency is a complex interplay (Deed et al., 2014) between teachers and students (Charteris, 2015a) and students and students (Charteris, 2016) that is co-produced in the material dynamics of classroom spaces.

Conclusion

Classroom learning is a complex interweave of multiple and diverse factors such as learner and teacher relationships, policy, discourses and pedagogical practices. These elements can extend beyond simplistic outcomes-focused notions that underpin neoliberal ideology. This article demonstrates how critical engagement with the wide and rich range of classroom issues, relationships, dynamics, and related data, can support teacher learning that transcends the professional development technicism of an exclusive focus on measureable student outcomes. Despite some of the limitations discussed above, teachers can target student assessment literacy through using Teaching as Inquiry as a process of critical and transformational change, thus surpassing the narrow focus on test results as the primary data for teacher inquiry into student achievement. The findings surface a paradox around the neoliberal notion of agency in classrooms where students can appear to be agentic in that they are compliant, yet they are highly dependent on teacher direction. When Teaching as Inquiry is undertaken in ways that reveal 'unwelcome truths', the politics of schooling can be revealed. A holistic form of learner agency can be fostered, even within powerful neoliberal schooling dynamics.

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