

Leong, W.S. (2014). Knowing the intentions, meaning and context of classroom assessment: A case study of Singaporean teacher's conception and practice. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 43, 70–78.

Knowing the Intentions, Meaning and Context of Classroom Assessment:

A Case Study of Teacher's Conception and Practice

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Studies in Educational Evaluation

Several researchers have highlighted that teachers worldwide are facing an unprecedented challenge in grasping and introducing new classroom assessment practices at all stages of the educational system to raise students' academic achievements (Broadfoot et al., 1991; Mok, 2008; Pope et al., 2009; Price et al., 2012). A prioritisation of 'teachers' competency' (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 1996) in helping teachers acquire a new 'assessment literacy' (Deluca & Klinger, 2010; Price et al., 2012) is yet another example of the pervasive influence of the performativity agenda in the education system worldwide today (Ball, 2003; 2012). Spotlights on classroom assessment have intensified, particularly in countries in North America and Western Europe in recent years, as national and international test results become part of the political debates surrounding the need to raise the quality of education (Lang et al., 1999). In countries like the USA and Germany, where the results of international comparative measures of educational achievement were seen as inadequate, policies have been put in place to invest in large-scale comparative research and to institute standardised testing regimes, in the hope of improving teaching and learning. The attempt at implementing any new classroom assessment practices in these countries has to be understood within the context of such issues.

In many Asian countries there are still on-going struggles to improve basic schooling and teaching infrastructures. There are also contexts like Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan, whose students are already 'top of the class' in international comparative measures of educational achievement (McKinsey, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2009; OECD Newsroom, 2013). The relevant policy question is quite different for these countries than for the rest of Asia and indeed the world; these countries must consider the implications of these

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consistently 'good' results, and, more specifically, what kind of quality classroom assessment may be needed in the next decades without compromising the high standards that have been maintained so far. Such deep evaluative questions have already been noted by Kennedy et al. (2008); they cannot find their lineage from educational systems in Anglophone and Western European countries, which face their own issues. Yet, in all these different contexts, changes in how teachers conceptualise new classroom assessment seem to be expected and significant shifts between enacting 'old' and 'new' standards (Gardner et al., 2010) of quality classroom assessment practices must ensue.

Singaporean Assessment Initiatives: 'Holistic and Balanced Assessment'

Following a review of primary-school education in 2009, the Singapore government supported a key recommendation by the Primary School Review Committee (PERI) to address the overemphasis on testing and examination, particularly at lower primary levels. The Committee recommended that 'Holistic Assessment' that supports student learning be progressively introduced in all primary-school classrooms, starting with lower primary in 2011 (PERI, 2009). At the same time, another Assessment Review Committee within the Ministry of Education (MOE) was convened to review and explore ways to refine the examination and assessment landscape across all other Singaporean schools. The recommendation for changes in assessment beyond primary schools proposed by the Committee involved helping secondary and junior college schools and teachers to consider the possibilities of 'Balanced Assessment', involving the judicious use of both 'Assessment for and of Learning' (AfL/AoL). However, recognising the robust primary and secondary education system, respected for its high standards, both committees concluded that the national standardised examinations, such as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), should remain a key stage examination, ensuring that the 'national assessment framework continues to maintain high standards and ensure the acquisition of strong foundational knowledge' (PERI, 2009, p. 35). They noted that the national examination system articulates explicit curriculum goals and standards, and sets a defined benchmark for all pupils and teachers to work towards. This has helped students to meet minimum standards

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at each key stage level, while avoiding the huge disparities in educational standards across schools evident in other countries.

The introduction of education initiatives that support the use of assessment to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom is relatively late-coming considering the output of research and policy documents and research literature on classroom assessment that have emerged worldwide since the 1990s. One might speculate that such an introduction was carefully considered to gradually initiate changes in classroom assessment in Singaporean primary and secondary schools in the coming years. While Singaporean schools have inherited a colonial legacy of the English examination system, which has served the country well for over forty years, policy-makers and educators now have other priorities. The initiatives articulate a different order of worth and value of 'holistic education' that should help students to be more confident, curious and yet still retain the aspiration to succeed academically (MOE, 2005; Ng, 2008; Heng; 2011). An important issue for implementation such a change is whether we adequately understand teachers' negotiations of different goals of education, and enact practices within classrooms that resonate with the intent of the currently espoused student-centric initiatives, while the national examination system is still in place. This paper emphasises the importance of understanding teachers' knowledge within the context of them being the primary agency of change in classroom assessment practices; how their negotiation of different mediating influences determines and perhaps limits the quality of classroom assessment practices.

Conceptual Framework: Knowing Teachers' Conceptions and Practices

A particular class of research on teachers' knowledge, which has become prominent since the 1990s through to recent years, uses the term *teachers' conceptions* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Eisner, 2002; Tan, 2012) as the focus of study of teachers' knowledge. According to Thompson (1992, p. 130), conceptions are 'general mental structures, encompassing beliefs, meanings and concepts'. I use the word 'conception' as a most inclusive starting point that takes into consideration ways of knowing teachers' beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, values and

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any other possible constructs that they deem useful to describe their classroom practices. Such an all-encompassing way of defining conception is based in part on a larger body of psychological research on the theory of action, intentions, agency and its extension to the philosophy of the mind (Davidson, 1980; Bratman, 1987; Pacherie, 2008). This suggests that what teachers believe and intend, the amount of control they have or perceive they have, and the norms of their social environment, interact to shape the types of thinking or actions they carry out in the classroom.

A *practice* is the carrying out of consequences on the basis of judgements of likelihood and predictions about the effects of different courses of action (Schutz, 1970). This suggests that a *classroom practice* requires a frame of reference going beyond identifying action on the part of the observer in the classroom to that of the teachers' intentions. My understanding of 'practice' is thus not a methodical, rule-governed skill that can first be taught 'in theory' and then applied and easily observed in the classroom. Instead, it can only be acquired by an individual who, in the course of being initiated into a particular practice, comes to understand that what he/she is doing is unavoidably directed towards the pursuit of some 'good' that is not related to the satisfaction of his/her own immediate needs and desires, but is internal to the practice itself (MacIntyre, 2007). It is about a *practical reasoning* rooted in a natural human capacity 'to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 141). Practical reasoning of teachers is thus directed towards taking principled action in their own classrooms (Gauthier, 1963; Atkin, 1992; Eisner, 2002). However, in terms of locating the 'goodness' within classroom practice, it does not necessarily physically reside mainly in the classroom or an observable environment. Alexander (1992) proposed that any 'good' classroom practices actually lie within a complex decision-making space of intersection of considerations for a teacher (see Text Box 1):

Text Box 1: Categories of questions on classroom assessment practice (adapted from Alexander, 1992)

Cultural /Societal Expectations: What (assessment) practices do I value and believe in?

Political Forces: What (assessment) practices do Ministry officials and school leaders advocate/not advocate?

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Empirical Findings: Which (assessment) practices can be shown to be most effective in promoting teaching and learning?
Pragmatic Solutions: What (assessment) practices work best (or do not work) for me?
Conceptual Clarities: What is (assessment) practice? What are its essential elements?

Alexander (1992) proposed that these questions discriminate the ‘good’ in what constitutes ‘practices’ for different teachers. The fact that there are several categories of question about what classroom assessment practice entails can cause teachers to be confronted by numerous, often conflicting goals. I propose that the diagram (see Figure 1) is a useful conceptual framework for my research interest in studying what teachers are conceptualising and practising in terms of ‘good’ classroom assessment:

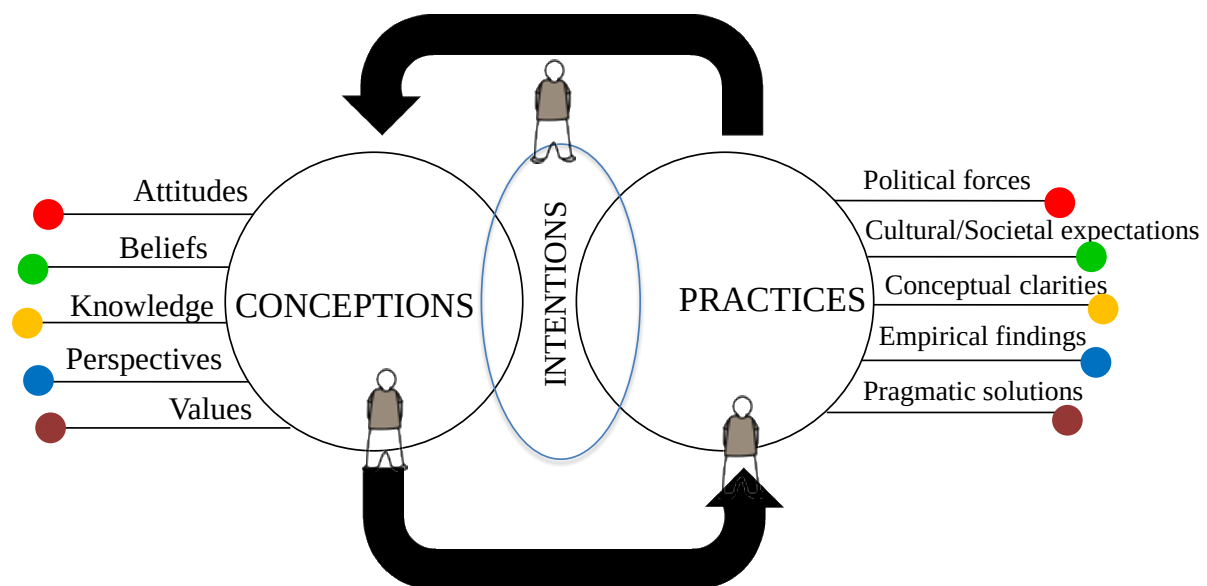


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of research of knowing teachers' conceptions and practices of classroom assessment

Such a bifocal framework provides a metaphorical lens for *knowing* through seeing and hearing possibly evolving teachers' conceptions and practices of classroom assessment. Such a lens of research does not attempt to capture everything a teacher does and think in the

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classroom. Rather it attempts to bring about an understanding of a teacher's practical reasoning or intention of conception and practice. The notion of intention lies at the intersection of teachers' conceptions and practices. It is a central element in the web of possible dialectical relationships of conceptions and practices used to characterise practical decision-making and the various kinds of action that belong to a particular set of conceptions and practices (Pacherie, 2008; Blackler & Regan, 2009; Gheradi, 2009). The methodological goal and challenge is therefore to access how their classroom assessment conceptions and practices are constructed, in relation to their day-to-day classroom teaching.

Overall, I have adopted a pragmatic epistemological stance of knowing teachers' conceptions and practices (Dewey, 1938, 1939) with a view to understanding what Sellars (2007) calls 'the space of reasons'. This is an introspection space of how teachers exercise agency of their own thinking and actions, and navigate within a practical context of tensions, constraints, and possibilities. What they decide as knowledge rests not so much on how strongly a 'fact' correlates with the world as in their personal and subjective judgements, which are mediated by their social contexts, their own past experiences, and by what those around may allow or disallow them to say or do. Threaded throughout the review of research on conceptions and practices of teachers is an appreciation of the depth, sensitivity and location-specific knowledge of a teacher's professional journey.

Methodology: A Way of Knowing

The findings reported in this paper form a critical part of the results of a three-year PhD research that investigated a group of Singaporean case-study teachers' different experiences of 'knowing' classroom assessment. The case studies were qualitatively driven using phenomenography (P), with an inclusion of Q-Methodology (Q). Both P and Q focus on the various ways people approach experiencing a phenomenon, their ideas and the various ways of thinking and acting, with the aim of presenting relationships of one another. Fundamental to an understanding of using both methods within the case-study methodology is their subscription to a pragmatic approach of knowing an experience (Dewey, 1938). This

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embodies a non-dualistic view of human cognition insofar as it depicts experience as a dialectical transaction of human beings and the world (Dewey, 1938; 1939). By examining the differences in the structure of awareness through these complementary ways of seeing and hearing teachers' conceptions and practices, I hope the phenomenon of 'classroom assessment' can be better triangulated and understood from a teacher's experiences. Table 1 summarises the research questions and the bricolage of P and Q within the multiple case studies of Singaporean teachers.

Phenomenography (P)	Q-Methodology (Q)
Focus Research Questions: RQ1: What are Singaporean case-study teachers' conception(s) and practice(s) of classroom assessment? (Also vis-à-vis a larger group or case study of Singaporean teachers.) RQ2: How can the case-study teachers' conceptions and practices be understood in terms of the mediating influences (or dimensions of variations)? RQ3: What are the relationships between the case-study teachers' conceptions and	Focus Research Questions: RQ1: What are Singaporean case-study teachers' conception(s) and practice (s) of classroom assessment? (Also vis-à-vis a larger group or case study of Singaporean teachers.) RQ4: How do the conceptions of case-study teachers relate to a larger group or case of teachers?

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Phenomenography (P)	Q-Methodology (Q)
practices of classroom assessment?	
Intention: Focus on identifying the critical differences of conceptions and practices based on minimum number of qualitative features or dimensions necessary for drawing distinctions of classroom assessment <i>outcome space</i> .	Intention: Focus on searching and validating the logical relationships between different conceptions of classroom assessment (through sorting a <i>concourse</i> of statements of classroom assessment) among the case-study teachers AND a larger group of comparable teachers.
Data Collection: Series of individual interviews and lesson observation.	Data Collection: Administration of Q-sort and interview.
Analysis: Analysis is based on aggregated responses of interview and lesson observation data across case-study teachers.	Analysis: Analysis is based on individual and group ranking of statements of Q-set.

Table 1: Use of P and Q in proposed case study of Singaporean teachers

In the main PhD study, six case-study teachers were selected from a pool of ‘high-achieving’ Singaporean teachers, who were successfully admitted to a well-subscribed Master of Education course, offered by the only teaching college in Singapore. The entry requirements for this Masters programme served as important criteria for selecting case-study teachers for the research. These teachers had a good, if not exemplary, teaching track record and were also likely to be holding leadership roles in their schools. The teachers were interviewed for at least four to five hours and observed for at least twelve lessons for a period of seven months in order to ensure that lessons prior to both the examination and non-examination season of the school terms were observed.

The findings from the phenomenographical phase of research for one case-study teacher, Alisha, is discussed in this paper to illustrate how the research involved the case-study teacher in some form of ‘practical reasoning’, verbalising and enacting espoused conceptions and practices of classroom assessment. The identification of a master list of codes, developed through the iterative process of alternating back and forth between a view of the interview

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and lesson observation transcripts, helped me to weave together hearing and seeing the main themes in what Alisha said and did. I chose to focus on this particular case-study teacher to demonstrate that, while she was a relatively young (but experienced) teacher, she could bring much wisdom of practice to her choices and interactions with students. Alisha, apart from committing to the seven months of research with me, subsequently went through another ten months of intensive interviews and lesson observations by other Singaporean colleagues in the MOE for a national teaching award. She was later conferred an award for being one of the outstanding teachers of the year. Alisha was therefore, according to Stake (2005), an *instrumental case* to provide special insights into particular issues, interrogate generalisations or build theory. In my findings, various informational items, including her values, beliefs, and actual activities of classroom assessment, were 'pieced together' as her argument for a common 'good' of classroom assessment through my knowing different episodes of interactions with the teacher.

Through the reciprocal interaction of hearing and seeing the interview and observation data, I was sensitive to the task of identifying variations and relationships between teachers' conceptions and practices. The interpretation of the variations and relationships was not just about reproducing the optical and aural representations of 'hearing' and 'seeing', but an attempt at a more unitary sensing of commonalities and differences of episodes of case-study teachers' interviews and lesson observations. This final process of coding began with differentiation, where utterances and observation data found to be of particular interest for each of the teachers were selected and marked. In the final process of the analysis, I repeatedly allowed the case-study teachers and non-participating teachers to conduct member checking of my coding process, analytic coding categories, dimensions and overall findings. I also made use of extensive peer debriefing and consultation with different experts to explore aspects of the research that might otherwise remain implicit and uncontested.

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Knowing Alisha's Conceptions and Practices

Alisha was a form teacher of a primary five class in a government mixed-gender school. She was one of the first few teachers to respond to my invitation to participate in the research and received keen support from her principal. Despite being just into her fourth year of teaching and in her first school, Alisha was appointed the school research assistant (RA) to spearhead and document the process of trialling an 'innovative' curricular project within the school. This was funded by the MOE as part of the 'Teach Less Learn More' (TLLM) *ignite* initiative, whereby schools were invited to submit proposals that would engage students in their learning process. As an RA, she received training on research methodology, and attended workshops on programme evaluation and formative assessment by MOE officers, university lecturers and professors. She also took part in school visits around Singapore and an overseas trip to Auckland, New Zealand, where she learnt how schools there implemented formative assessment. Together with her colleagues in the School-Based Curriculum Innovation (SCI) team, she decided to produce a writing package that incorporated formative assessment. As an extension of her work as an RA, she enrolled herself in a part-time Masters in Education (since the MOE had made arrangements for transferrable credits of the RA classes to Masters-level classes in the university). For her commitment to teaching, she was one of only nine Singaporean teachers presented with a prestigious national teacher's award in 2012 by the MOE.

'Every child is capable of learning'

In the initial interviews prior to lesson observation, Alisha acknowledged that Singaporean society was very examination-oriented; hence, there was always pressure to perform well in tests and examinations. She did not think this was necessarily bad per se, as she believed that tests and examinations were tools for motivating students to strive for their best both in school and beyond. However, she was not convinced that the teachers were always clear about their responsibility to teach well, particularly for students who were unable to perform well in examinations and tests:

Yes I have heard of teachers who tell me that 'my class just cannot write composition well'... in

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my heart I was thinking, maybe you should ask yourself, 'Am I able to teach composition writing well?'... Because I think that no matter what, there will be some students who cannot do certain things but as a teacher if you can teach them how to do it at better level, then it shouldn't be a case that the students would not ever be able to write well in whichever circumstances? (Interview, 26 March 2011)

Earlier, Alisha was emphatic that 'every child is capable of learning' in the classroom and it was therefore up to the teacher to 'learn how they learn' (19 January 2011, italics added). This would, according to her, involve the teacher being sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of student learning and interest, and being able to make use of the appropriate teaching strategy. She also talked about the need to be reflective about the effectiveness of her teaching through examining what students had learnt through their homework, classwork or class activities. She acknowledged that it was impossible to do that daily but that 'sometimes you just have to make time to do that self-evaluation' (ibid.). What was counter-productive in teaching, according to Alisha, was to rely exclusively on 'drilling' or repeated administration of similar exercises for students to be 'drilled into', producing expected or formulaic solutions. Alisha was very clear that effective learning meant students being able to know and articulate clearly what they were learning on a daily basis.

'Motivating students to enjoy learning throughout the day and possibly their lives'

When asked what assessment meant to her, Alisha referred on many occasions to the successful pilot of the 'writing package' she had developed, which made use of formative assessment strategies to help her students improve their writing. In my interviews with her, she always stated her valuing of formative assessment in her classroom.

It [formative assessment] is good teaching because you track and respond to the kid's learning and it is more effective than just giving a grade if you want to help the child. By the time you administer a summative assessment, it's usually too late to help the student [...] Formative assessment is able to motivate my students to enjoy learning throughout the day and possibly their lives. (Interview, 26 March 2011)

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In the same interview, she talked about how good assessment needed to support student learning; this was consistent with her beliefs about what effective teaching constituted in the first place. Alisha explained that 'assessing well' involved being able to build a rapport with students through 'learning how they learn'. For instance, she cited the use of role-playing and peer assessment to involve the whole class in giving feedback to one another, and for her to learn about what they knew. In one of the lessons (19 April 2011), Alisha distributed the completed letter-writing exercise to different students to comment on their friend's letter. She told them they would need to post their feedback and letter back to their friends:

This is a simple peer assessment activity, but by 'dressing up' the activity in the form of students playing the role of a 'postmen', I wanted to inject an element of novelty and surprise in an otherwise rather mundane process. So the students know that the comments they write to is for their friends to read... Also the students would be eager to 'receive' the feedbacks from one of their classmates ... it is much more effective than always hearing from me. It also gave me a chance to hear more from the students. (Post-lesson interview, 19 April 2010)

Alisha understood the importance of preparing students for the summative assessment test and examination at the end of each term. She acknowledged that use of preparatory summative assessment tasks could motivate students to strive for good results, but more important to her was that students were clear about what they were striving for and what getting a good grade meant in the context of learning English.

Alisha also understood that the desire to get good marks drove students to work hard. She devised a system whereby students' performances in each of the major tests and examinations were published on the board or a league table. Students knew which 'stage' of performance they were in compared to their peers. Their class-seating arrangement was regularly changed so that they were sitting with a friend who had similar marks. Alisha explained:

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In the first place, the students are always eager to know what grade or marks their friends get. So this chart gives them a picture of the class performance and also where they stand. By changing the seats of the students, first of it tells them that they are all in the same stage or grade, and they should work harder together, and also I suppose it is more interesting, as they get to interact with different friends each time and learn from one another. (Interview, 26 March 2011)

The purpose of such a practice was to motivate and encourage students. More importantly, students should know how to work harder through interaction with their peers. Alisha shared that it was rare for students to reach the top tier stage (almost full marks for tests), but most were able to pass the tests well. Therefore, she wanted students to appreciate that high marks were not easy to obtain but were certainly within their reach ultimately. She further explained in this interview extract that she valued group work, as, by reading each other's work, students got a better idea of what they could improve on.

Obviously at the end of the day they have to sit for the individual assessment, like tomorrow there is SA2 test... so there is individualised testing... But leading to this, the students have been very used to group work or pair work... I try to match students with the same ability together... since I have known the class for about two years I know like each student and I know who is best to work with who... so instead of pairing someone who is quite fast in learning with someone who needs a bit more time, I try to pair students with same abilities together.... I see a lot of learning taking place when they are in their pairs and hopefully it will show through their individual work when they sit for their test. (Interview, 27 September 2011)

While Alisha reminded students of the various expectations of tests and examinations, I did not observe that she would deliberately 'drill' students by giving them repeated exercises. Up to the week before the examination, she was still teaching and introducing new lessons and was not in any sort of 'preparation' mode for the tests or examinations. When asked why she was relatively nonchalant about them, she responded that she believed all the formative assessment strategies she had previously introduced to the class were already preparing students for the final summative assessment.

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You can drill to a certain extent comprehension skills but for the others, I don't see any usefulness in doing lots of mock tests and examinations. They can keep doing the tests and examinations but eventually I don't think they will learn anything. Their marks will still be the same. (Interview, 22 February)

I think it's important to find out where their strengths and weaknesses and all in writing and speaking through giving them a mark and grade in a test. This is important but I don't do it all the time. I prefer writing detailed feedbacks to them in their daily work. Because the kids enjoy reading things that are written to them as opposed to a mark. (Interview, 26 March 2011)

Alisha acknowledged that her colleagues might not agree with her view of classroom assessment, and would prefer the 'trusted' way of repeatedly asking students to write compositions, complete comprehensions and monitor grades as a kind of security blanket to monitor evidence of 'improvement' in teaching and learning:

Those who are on-board... it is not difficult to convince them. Like this school has a very open culture honestly and my school leaders are fully supportive of my work. But there are other [colleagues] who feel that, errr, all these are just jazz are those who haven't had time to see results yet. I mean they feel that it's too time-consuming. They feel that rather than go through the self and peer assessment, they can give their kids lots of compositions to do and see results. So people who are very result-oriented they see that's the only way. At least they have statistics to show that they are doing work and they expect me to show the same. But when you do formative assessment you don't even have time to do a full-length composition at times and certainly you may not see 'improvement' in marks quickly. So it's something that, it's tricky to balance. (Interview, 26 March 2011)

In most of Alisha's lessons, she would first write down the learning goals on the board and then explain how they would proceed to achieve the goals (see Text Box 2).

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Text Box 2: Field notes of English lesson (Alisha), 5 April 2011

As expected, the first thing that Alisha did after greeting the students was to write down on the board the learning goals for the next series of lessons: 'Read aloud fluently', 'Describe a picture' and 'Hold a good conversation'. I was expecting her to further explain what each of these goals meant and she did that by going through the criteria that the students could use to determine whether the reading was good:

- i. Clear and good pronunciation
- ii. Fluent without hesitation
- iii. Appropriate pauses in-between readings
- iv. Appropriate variation of pitch and tone
- v. Volume is audible

After discussing the criteria using especially prepared exemplars, Alisha then instructed the students that they would be asked to assess each other's reading by placing ☺ and ☹ against each of the criteria. She moderated students' responses and gave appropriate comments to help them to help each other improve. I consider this quite a good model for the use of formative assessment. (Field notes, 5 April 2011)

The formative assessment did not just manifest as a series of strategies but was fully embedded within what the students and Alisha referred to as an 'assessment lesson' (22 February 2011). Such an 'assessment lesson' required the students to understand the expectations of the learning and also to practise giving feedback to one another. In setting up such a lesson, Alisha ensured that the classroom environment and also the choice of teaching material were appropriate for the students. The classroom walls had posters of the 'success criteria' for writing and rubrics that informed the students of the standards required to achieve various bands of writing performance. Exemplary students' writings were also showcased in different corners of the room.

While waiting for Alisha and the students, I took my time to walk around the classroom. What caught my eyes were the several colourfully designed poster messages that Alisha had pasted on the walls. There were messages like: 'Reach for your goals', 'Always do your best', 'We can only move forward if we know where we are now'. As I continued to walk around the class and I

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saw students' works being showcased on the wall...with different marks being awarded (Content = 7 marks, Content = 8 marks, Content = 4 marks). Alongside is the direction to 'Read your friend's work – did they use good adjectives, adverbs and idioms? Do you know why the writing was awarded that particular mark?' (Field notes, 27 September 2011)

Finally, Alisha came across as a very encouraging teacher who was always convinced that her students were capable of learning and performing well, as long as they were 'taught well' and were motivated to perform to the best of their ability. She also understood that the desire to strive for good grades and marks was a natural motivator for students to work hard. For instance, she reminded them regularly that 5-2 class was capable of scoring high marks just because they were in '5-2'.

I am going to see who can come up with the most creative writing... you can do it because you are class of 5-2. Think of the students who got a PSLE aggregate score of 260. All of you are capable of that. (English lesson, 29 March 2011)

On other occasions, Alisha tried to motivate her students to strive for good writing by inspiring them through highlighting different 'prizes' or 'exemplary models':

Alisha was preparing the class for lesson on writing. After Alisha returned the class the second draft of their essay, she encouraged the students to re-read their essay and think about how to improve their draft. She commented at the end of the lesson, their essays should be so good it can be published in the xxx *Primary Essay Book*, (Field notes, 8 March 2011)

Text Box 3: English lesson transcript (Alisha), 3 May 2011

Extract of English class on poem writing, 3 May 2011

[Alisha showed examples of acrostic poems]

Alisha: *I don't want you to use words like 'sweet', 'adorable'... maybe you can write these when you are nine years old. But now you should be able to write in full sentence with a wider*

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vocabulary of words. Try to string the sentences together... must be creative like the examples here.

[She showed more examples]

Alisha: Over the weekend, take time to get inspirations and write many drafts.... you cannot possibly compose a poem in an hour ... a good writer must have many drafts. Remember that Albert Einstein had failed many times before succeeding so you must not feel discouraged when you fail the first time.

Alisha highlighted in the post-lesson interview (3 May 2011) that apart from helping them to understand how to be successful in their learning, another important goal for her assessment practice was to help them recognise that success was possible if they gave themselves a chance to try, fail and then try their best again. Enabling the students to assess their own learning honestly, confidently and optimistically became part and parcel of daily learning experiences for them.

The overview of Alisha's conceptions and practices of classroom assessment is summarised in Figure 2, which provides an overview of 'what', 'how' and 'why' classroom assessment was viewed and enacted, and the clusters of codes that led to the current interpretation for Alisha's conception and practice of classroom assessment. Her conception of classroom assessment was all forms of engaging teaching activities that could support students' learning. She believed that formative assessment could be fully integrated into learning (in which a lesson could entirely be called an 'assessment lesson') or formed an essential part of it. She also recognised the importance of summative assessment practices, for example, using grades and league tables to motivate students to strive for the best; however, her priority was for students to understand the spectrums of meaning of failure and success of learning and to be able to work responsibly on their own.

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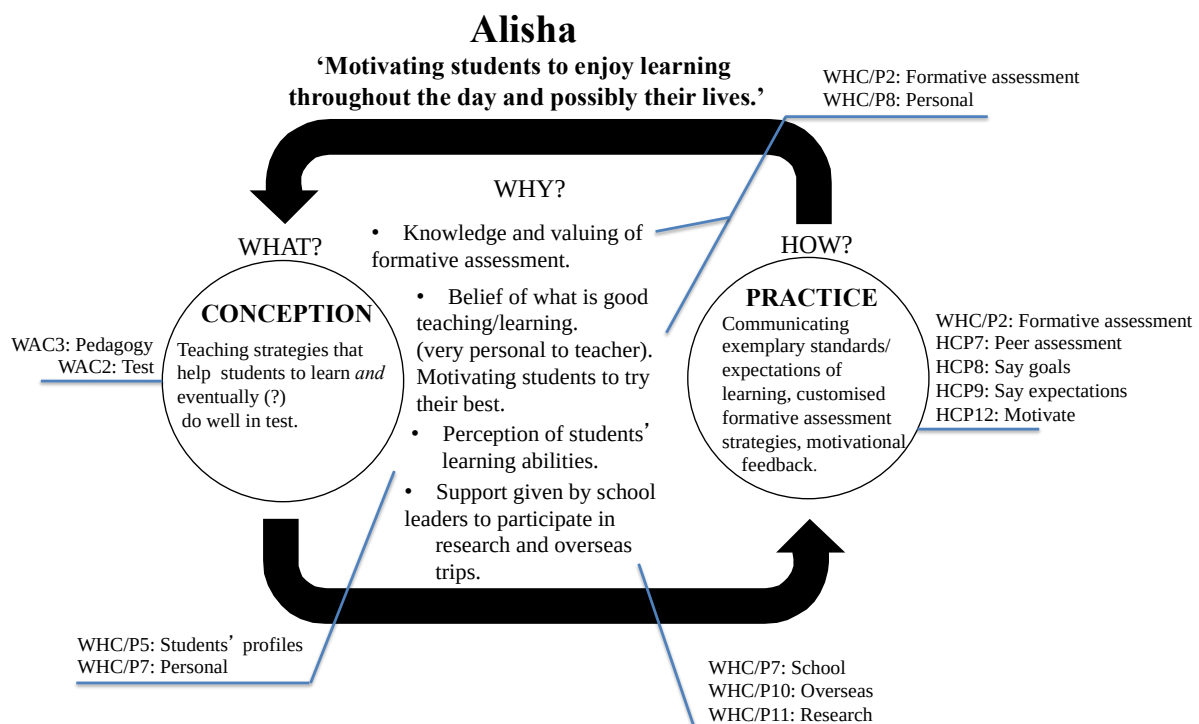


Figure 2: Overview of Alisha's conceptions and practices of classroom assessment

Alisha considered herself unique in holding a set of beliefs on teaching and learning that did not privilege 'teaching to the test' and drilling of students. She was unwilling to impose the learning and enacting of formative assessment on other teachers who might not believe in it. The support from her school leaders, and subsequent experience as an RA, with all the accompanying training and research in formative assessment, were significant in terms of why she could value and make use of formative assessment in her class. Another possible source of tension was the expectation on her students to show improvement in actual test and examination performance, which Alisha seemed to take for granted.

Discussion: Recreating Ways of Knowing for Others

Alisha's conception of classroom assessment makes reference to varying extents of importance of summative assessment consideration, and how formative assessment underpinned her practice. The blurred distinction between using assessment to support

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learning and to account for learning suggests that the relationship between formative and summative assessment is, as Harlen (2012) noted, a continuum rather than a dichotomy. This infers that formative and summative assessment may not be distinguishable, particularly if teachers tend to use a variation or combination thereof in class. Based on the analysis of Alisha's classroom assessment practices, I suggest that different practices could be *oriented* to (but not exclusively) formative or summative (see Table 2) assessment.

Formative assessment-oriented practices	Summative assessment-oriented practices
Communicate and demonstrate exemplary standards/expectations of learning. Provide motivational feedback to students to encourage learning. Provide appropriate scaffolding for individual students. Get students to peer/self-assess their own learning. Emphasise values of learning.	Provide motivational feedback to and/or reprimand students to achieve 'higher scores' in tests/examinations. Provide feedback/scaffold according to what the whole class needs to know regarding how to respond to test questions. Emphasise the importance of grades and scores.

Table 2: Alisha's classroom practices oriented towards formative or summative assessment.

Based on this list of practices, I also suggest that Alisha has to conceptualise and enact classroom assessment based on different competing agendas: preparing students for standardised test or examinations; supporting the learning of individual students; and meeting the demands of school in terms of stipulated performance expectation of students. Such a view was corroborated by Rea-Dickins (2006) and McNamara (2001), who observed that classroom assessment needed to be understood and practised in terms of competing demands and agendas.

Bennett (2011) pointed out that a definitional issue of summative and formative assessment is the oversimplification of its meaning and the complex relationship between these two purposes of classroom assessment. It is problematic, for instance, to consider how a more

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summative-oriented assessment practice can be 'absolved' from any responsibility for supporting students' learning. Similarly, it is impractical, particularly in the context of Singaporean classrooms, whereby tests and examinations are common fare, to realise assessment practices that focus exclusively on students' learning. Therefore, while a conceptual distinction between the purposes of formative and summative assessments can be made, teachers' intentions can be so entangled or multi-dimensional that to classify their practices according to formative or summative purposes might be very difficult. Rather, it is more likely, as teachers like Alisha has shown us, that they would need to attend to and use a combination of them in the class.

Bigg's response to Black and Wiliam's seminal review article (1998) argues for 'sensible educational models [to] make effective use of both formative and summative assessment' (Biggs, 1998, p. 105). Since teachers could have different intentions regarding a particular classroom assessment practice, it may not be immediately clear whether they have indeed been intentionally realising formative and/or summative assessment. What I suggest is that studying teachers' intentions can illuminate the relative degree of 'formativeness/summativeness'. I propose there is a spectrum of intentions spanning the two extreme positions of whether teachers are privileging mastery of learning and performance goals (see Table 1). The list of intentions is gathered from interpreting the clusters of 'why' codes of conception and practice for the different case-study teachers. Alisha's 'why' codes are highlighted with asterixes in Table 3.

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Formative assessment-oriented practices	Intentions of enacting a particular classroom assessment practice	Summative assessment-oriented practices
Communicate and demonstrate exemplary standards/expectations of learning. Provide motivational feedback to students to encourage learning. Provide/masking appropriate scaffolding for individual students. Emphasise values of learning. Get students to peer/self-assess their own learning. Adjust lessons to attend to 'incidental teaching' for students to learn more deeply about particular disciplinary knowledge/skills.	Formative-oriented intentions Privilege mastery of learning. (*) Know and value formative assessment. (*) Believe different teaching subjects require different practices (particularly addressing formative assessment). Uncertain of what formative assessment practice is (but willing to explore possibilities of formative assessment). Adhere to guidance of national/school's policy on formative and summative assessment. Believe that students have limited learning abilities and motivation to learn (need to use grade as a extrinsic motivation of learning). Trust in past experiences of learning/teaching (more emphasis on 'rote-learning'). Prepare students for national examinations (e.g. feel students need a lot of 'drilling' and scolding). Privilege students' performance in tests/examinations. (*) Summative-oriented intentions	Teach to the test. Conduct remedial lessons to reinforce certain 'drilling' of examination questions. Provide motivational feedback to and/or reprimand students to achieve 'higher scores' in tests/examinations. Provide feedback/scaffold according to what the whole class needs to know regarding how to respond to test questions. Emphasise the importance of grades and scores. Administer formative/summative tasks according to what school has 'standardised'. Adjust lessons according to pace of completing such tasks.

Table 3: Different intentions of teachers' corresponding to different degrees of orientation of formative and summative assessment practices

Teachers' intentions could be vulnerable to qualitative changes towards more formative and summative purposes. In other words, their intentions can shift dynamically based on circumstances or contexts of teaching and learning. Notably, Alisha could navigate between

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formative and summative purposes according to privileging performance and learning. While Alisha was concerned with student performance goals, and made use of grades and marks as motivation, she was equally, if not more, concerned with helping students access deeper forms of learning (Marton et al., 1992). I argue that, for Alisha, performance goals were not seen as distinct from mastery goals, as she could identify and enact assessment activities that moved students between 'deep' and 'surface' learning strategically (Entwistle et al., 2001). This finding is important because it suggests that a concern for the pragmatic outcomes of performance-oriented classroom assessment need not preclude striving for deeper learning-related goals.

Where the mastery of learning-oriented approaches of teaching would align itself more naturally with formative assessment that abides more stringently to the principles of AfL (Assessment Reform Group, 2002), a more performance-oriented version of formative assessment could be another starting-point for understanding how learning and teaching can take place productively in a different way. This is particularly so if the conceptualisation and enactment of classroom assessment is not viewed statically, but is amendable to changes dynamically according to different context even within the same classroom. Hence, I wish to emphasise that any framework or guidelines for evaluating teachers' classroom assessment need to be sensitive to the varying teachers' intentions, meaning and context of teaching. Since all forms of assessment can lead to potentially some kind of learning (Gardner, 2010), the issue is how teachers can prioritise the appropriate assessment in different contexts or conditions of teaching. As Kennedy et al. (2008) pointed out, more research is needed on how formative and summative-oriented assessment practices have been harmonised productively for certain teachers in Asian classrooms. This entails critical awareness of their teaching and learning beliefs (James & Lewis, 2012), and how the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment needs to be considered in tandem. For researchers of classroom assessment, this means accepting that the socio-cultural dimension of the classroom matters; that it may be futile to expect any consistent and global theory of quality classroom assessment to be practised uniformly across contexts. Rather, we have to accept and live with certain

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contradictions and see dilemmas not as impediments of understanding but rather that they present opportunities for new ways of knowing, particularly in terms of local sense-making.

Further theorisation and empirical studies of how the different teachers' intentions could cohere or harmonise with a particular purpose of classroom assessment can bring about a better understanding of how teachers reconcile the complexities of decision-making in assessment judgements. We should find ways to understand why certain teachers' orientations towards dissonance and dilemmas, particularly in responding to summative assessment demands, are more positive than others. Future work in this area is significant because it reveals how classroom assessment can communicate different intentions to students and is an indicator to students of what is regarded as important to the teachers. This was highlighted by Boud and Falchikov (2006), who went even further to suggest that teachers' intentions in classroom assessment do influence students' learning in the longer term and beyond the classrooms (in this case of Alicia, helping students to enjoy learning throughout their lives). Whether the students are able to, and indeed do, interpret teachers' intentions appropriately, has been raised by other researchers (e.g. Rea-Dickins, 2006; Stobart, 2006; Price et al., 2012).

For the moment, it has become more possible for me to understand and share the subjective relationship between a particular Singaporean case-study teacher's experiences of classroom assessment, the context of which she is part and why she is regarded as an outstanding teacher in Singapore. The situative and embodied perspective helps me understand that much of what teachers 'think' is dialectically intertwined with the particular contexts in which they 'act'; such a focus also explains how different or similar settings for teachers' conceptions and practices give rise to different and similar kinds of evolution of knowing. A particular teacher's conception may not be recognisable outside its inter-subjective negotiated meaning, and what enables the 'competent' reproduction of a practice over and over again, and its refinement (and recognition) while being practised (or abandonment), is the practical reasoning of what is deemed appropriate. The eventual institutionalisation of classroom assessment (e.g. 'Balanced' or 'Holistic Assessment') is one of the key mediators that will

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simultaneously shape a teacher's conceptions and practices, identity and professional life. In knowing this, I recognise a particular humility that comes from a solidarity I share with a particular teacher; and our hopes that we may all be able to contribute to, and bequeath to those who come after us, classrooms that are worth being assessed and educated in.

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