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Teachers’ Conceptions of Assessment

Gavin Thomas Lumsden Brown

M. Ed. (Hons.) Massey University
B. Ed. (TESL) (Dist’n) Concordia University

Supervisor: Professor John A. C. Hattie, University of Auckland

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Abstract

Teachers’ conceptions are powerful in shaping the quality of their instructional practice. The purpose of this thesis is to defend a four-facet model of teachers’ conceptions of assessment, which revolves around emphasising improvement or school accountability, or student accountability purposes or treating assessment as irrelevant. Further, it explores how those conceptions relate to teachers’ conceptions of learning, teaching, curriculum, and teacher efficacy.

A literature review is used to identify the major conceptions. Multiple studies led to a 50-item Teachers’ Conceptions of Assessment (COA-III) questionnaire based on the four main conceptions of assessment. Structural equation modelling showed a close fit of a hierarchical, multi-dimensional model to the data. Teachers moderately agreed with the improvement conceptions and the system accountability conception. Teachers disagreed that assessment was irrelevant. However, teachers had little agreement that assessment was for student accountability. Improvement, school, and student accountability conceptions were positively correlated. The irrelevance conception was inversely related to the improvement conception and not related to the system accountability conception.

A four-factor structure of teachers’ beliefs about assessment, curriculum, teaching, learning, and teacher efficacy, was found. Teachers agreed that assessment influences and improves their teaching and student learning. They agreed less strongly that assessment, measuring surface learning only, makes schools, teachers, and students accountable and that teachers are able to conduct assessment through a systematic technological approach. They agreed at a similar level with student centred learning that involves deep approaches to learning, divorced from assessment. They disagreed with a telling type of teaching that focuses only on intellectual development of students or on reconstruction or reform of society.

Use of the CoA-III makes teachers’ conceptions of assessment more explicit and will assist in the development of teacher training programs, the design of assessment policy, and enhance further research into educational assessment practices. Furthermore, explicit attention to teachers’ conceptions of assessment is expected to be a precursor to teachers’ self-regulation of their assessment beliefs and practices.

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The bus is coming, and thanks to all of you, the story of how New Zealand teachers conceive of assessment can be told before it leaves!
Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 1
THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT ...................................................................................... 3
STRUCTURE OF THESIS ............................................................................................... 6

CHAPTER I. TEACHERS’ INSTRUCTIONAL CONCEPTIONS: LEARNING, CURRICULUM, TEACHING, EFFICACY, AND ASSESSMENT ................................. 10
CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING ...................................................................................... 11
CONCEPTIONS OF CURRICULUM ................................................................................. 15
CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHING ...................................................................................... 18
CONCEPTIONS OF EFFICACY ...................................................................................... 22
CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT ................................................................................. 24
Assumptions About Assessment .............................................................................. 25
Conception 1: Improvement of Teaching and Learning ........................................ 27
Conception 2: Accountability of Teachers and Schools ......................................... 32
Conception 3: Accountability of Students .............................................................. 40
Conception 4: Irrelevance ......................................................................................... 43
Summary .................................................................................................................... 49
CONCLUSIONS ........................................................................................................... 53

CHAPTER II. EXPLORING TEACHERS’ INSTRUCTIONAL CONCEPTIONS ................. 58
STUDY 1: IN-SERVICE SECONDARY TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING .... 59
Instruments ............................................................................................................... 62
Analysis .................................................................................................................... 66
Participants .............................................................................................................. 67
Results ...................................................................................................................... 69
Conceptions About Learning .................................................................................. 69
Conceptions About Curriculum ............................................................................. 71
Conceptions About Teaching .................................................................................. 73
Conceptions About Efficacy .................................................................................... 78
Assessment Practices .............................................................................................. 78
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 80
STUDY 2: IN-SERVICE PRIMARY TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT .... 82
Instrument ............................................................................................................... 82
Participants .............................................................................................................. 83
Results ...................................................................................................................... 84
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 91

CHAPTER III. MEASURING TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT .............. 94
STUDY 3: TEACHER TRAINEES’ CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT (CoA-I) ............. 97
STUDY 4: STUDENTS’ AND PRACTISING TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT (CoA-II) ........................................................................................................... 103
Concluding Comment ............................................................................................. 112
STUDY 5: TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT (CoA-III) ......................... 113
CHAPTER IV. A FOUR-FACET MODEL OF TEACHERS’ INSTRUCTIONAL CONCEPTIONS

STUDY 6: CoA-III RELATED TO TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING, CURRICULUM, TEACHING, AND TEACHER EFFICACY

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

Tables

Table 1. Learning Conceptions Items by Approach

Table 2. Interview Schedule for Teachers’ Conceptions about Curriculum, Teaching, Assessment, and Students

Table 3. Teacher Questionnaire Participants by School Size, School SES, and Subject

Table 4. Interviewed Teachers by Gender, Decile, and Teaching Level

Table 5. Teacher Conceptions of Learning Factor Structure
Table 6. Mean Learning Conceptions of Students and Teachers ........................................71
Table 7. Goals of Teachers for Their Subjects .................................................................72
Table 8. Teaching Approaches .....................................................................................74
Table 9. Recent Changes in Teaching Approach ............................................................75
Table 10. Definitions of Teaching .................................................................................76
Table 11. Attributes of Good Teachers ........................................................................77
Table 12. Frequency of Assessment Task Usage ............................................................79
Table 13. Deep and Surface Requirements in Examinations ...........................................80
Table 14. Teacher Conceptions About Obstacles to Achieving Teaching Goals ...........81
Table 15. In-Service Teachers Conceptions of Assessment Organised by Four Major
Conceptions ..................................................................................................................85
Table 16. Conceptions of Assessment Factors, Statements, and Loadings ....................98
Table 17. CoA-I Factors Means and Reliabilities ...........................................................101
Table 18. CoA-II Factor Structure Study 4 .................................................................104
Table 19. CoA-II Measurement Model Characteristics: Accountability, Improvement,
and Irrelevance ..............................................................................................................107
Table 20. CoA-II First Order Factor Loadings ...............................................................111
Table 21. Assessment Practices and Processes Statements, Factors and Loadings ......120
Table 22. CoA-III Key Demographic Characteristics Comparison ...............................123
Table 23. CoA-III Participant Characteristics ...............................................................125
Table 24. CoA-III Participants by School Characteristics .............................................126
Table 25. Intercorrelations CoA-III Model of Conceptions of Assessment .................128
Table 26. CoA-III Scale Characteristics ......................................................................130
Table 27. Percentage of Teachers by Agreement Level for CoA-III Scales ....................131
Table 28. CoA Mean Scale Scores Across Studies 3-5 ..................................................135
Table 29. Intercorrelation CoA-III Mean Scale Scores Across Studies .........................135
Table 30. Multidimensional Scaling of Types of Assessment ........................................137
Table 31. Frequency of MDS Assessment Types Scores .............................................138
Table 32. Multivariate Results COA-III by Assessment Type .....................................139
Table 33. Intercorrelations Assessment Practices Subscales .......................................139
Table 34. Intercorrelations Assessment Practices and CoA-III ....................................142
Table 35. CoA-III Participant Assessment Literacy Training .........................................144
Table 36. Multivariate Results COA-III Subscales by Assessment Literacy Training ....145
Table 37. Conceptions of Curriculum Inventory Statements, Factors, and Loadings ....153
Table 38. Teaching Perspectives Inventory Factors, Statements and Loadings ............155
Table 39. Teacher Efficacy Statements, Factors, and Loadings ....................................156
Table 40. Intercorrelations Conceptions of Learning and Co-A-III ...............................158
Table 41. Intercorrelations Conceptions of Learning and Related Conceptions ..........159
Table 42. Intercorrelations Conceptions of Curriculum Subscales ...............................162
Table 43. Intercorrelations Assessment Practices and Co-A-III ....................................162
Table 44. Intercorrelations Assessment Practices and Related Conceptions ................163
Table 45. Intercorrelations Teaching Perspectives Subscales .......................................164
Table 46. Intercorrelations of Teaching Perspectives and Co-A-III ...............................167
Table 47. Intercorrelations Teaching Perspectives and Related Conceptions ...............168
Table 48. Intercorrelations Conceptions of Efficacy and Co-A-III ...............................171
Table 49. Intercorrelations Conceptions of Efficacy and Related Conceptions ............171
Table 50. Factor Structure Teachers' Instructional Conceptions ....................................174
Table 51. Intercorrelations Teachers' Instructional Conceptions Factors .......................175
Table 52. Descriptive Statistics Teachers' Instructional Conceptions Factor Scores .......175
Figures

Figure 1. Primary Teachers’ Conceptions of Assessments Comments by Category ......84
Figure 2. CoA-I Factors Mean Scores.................................................................100
Figure 3. CoA-II Accountability Conception Measurement Model .........................108
Figure 4. CoA-II Improvement Conception Measurement Model ..........................109
Figure 5. CoA-II Irrelevance Conception Measurement Model ............................110
Figure 6. CoA-III Measurement Model of Conceptions of Assessment ..................129
Figure 7. Percentage of Teachers by Agreement Level for CoA-III Scales ............132
Figure 8. Three Dimensional Mapping of MDS Assessment Type Dimensions ......137
Figure 9. Assessment Practices Measurement Model .........................................140
Figure 10. Conceptions of Learning Measurement Model ................................158
Figure 11. Conceptions of Curriculum Measurement Model ...............................161
Figure 12. Conceptions of Teaching Measurement Model ..................................166
Figure 13. Conceptions of Teacher Efficacy Measurement Model ......................170
Figure 14. Four Factor Teachers’ Instructional Conceptions Measurement Model ......176