Mrs. Johnson's Story
Assessment as Learning in an Elementary Classroom
(Grade 4/5)

Modeling for Success
Mrs. Johnson teaches a Grade 4/5 combined class and is thinking about how to deepen her understanding and practice of assessment as learning this year. As part of her preparation, she reviews recent professional literature on assessment. She learns that experts in the field like Dr. Lorna Earl (2002) note that “assessment as learning focuses on the role of the student as the critical connector between assessment and learning” (Hawley & Rollie, p. 92). She also learns that assessment as learning focuses on developing students' capacity to be their own best assessors. In other words, students use the information from assessments to self-assess and reflect on their learning. However, students need support, modeling, practice, and guidance to develop the skills necessary to self-assess. Mrs. Johnson understands that assessment as learning can be a challenging process for teachers because it requires them to share control of the learning with their students.

She articulates a student-friendly learning goal to describe what they will be learning: "We are learning to give and receive descriptive feedback to help us know if we are reaching our learning goals." Next, Mrs. Johnson begins to gather, adapt, and develop various tools and strategies that will support her efforts to teach all of her students how to self and peer-assess using descriptive feedback to improve their learning. Mrs. Johnson asks another teacher – Ms. Lafleur – to help her explicitly model giving effective descriptive feedback and using it to improve her learning. Mrs. Johnson uses a sample newsletter she had already created and used with the students, since she wants the students to focus on the features of effective descriptive feedback and not new content.

Mrs. Johnson asks the students to watch the two teachers as they engage in giving and receiving feedback to see if they are using feedback successfully. Mrs. Johnson is hoping that the criteria for descriptive feedback will emerge as a result of the modeling. She starts the modeling by reviewing the learning goal and writing a few success criteria that they have used before with the students on the board. She discusses them with Ms. Lafleur:
Learning Goal | We are learning to communicate our message clearly to our intended audience.
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Context (Task) | “Welcome” newsletter to parents/guardians
Success Criteria | - uses parent-friendly language – explains words they might not know that we use in class
- contains important information about the classroom
- is easy to read – clear font, uses headings, makes sense, uses proper spelling and grammar, uses pictures to support the text

Ms. Lafleur comments: “Mrs. Johnson, after analysing the newsletter, I have some feedback about communicating your message clearly that I would like to share with you. In your newsletter, you identified important information that parents would want to know. However, when I think about the criteria ‘easy to read’, I noticed that there were so many graphics that I was distracted from the information. Perhaps you can choose fewer graphics by picking the ones with the most meaning?”

Mrs. Johnson responds: “Thank you so much, Ms. Lafleur, for your helpful descriptive feedback. I will make these changes and ask for further feedback.”

Mrs. Johnson shares her thinking with her students to model using descriptive feedback: “When I look at my newsletter again, I realize that having four graphics is too many and it does make my text hard to focus on. I think I’ll remove this one because it isn’t as important as the others and doesn’t add new information or clarify anything for parents. Hmmmm…actually, even three is too busy… and this one isn’t helpful either. I’ll take away this one too and rearrange the two that are left. There, that’s better! Once I have made these changes, I will ask Ms. Lafleur to give me feedback on the changes.”

Descriptive Feedback
After modeling, Mrs. Johnson reminds the students that the value of feedback lies in what it tells them about how they are learning. She asks the students to reflect on the descriptive feedback they observed Ms. Lafleur give to Mrs. Johnson and to identify the criteria for effective descriptive feedback. She asks students to share their thinking with partners before discussing it with the whole class. As they begin to share, she records their ideas in their language on the board. She listens carefully and asks prompting questions to help them to identify criteria they might have missed from the modeling. Mrs. Johnson posts the criteria on the wall so that students can refer to it during the next day’s activity and in subsequent lessons.
At the end of the lesson, Mrs. Johnson asks her students to reflect on their current understanding of descriptive feedback by completing the following exit ticket:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES!</th>
<th>NOT SURE ??</th>
<th>NOT YET ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can tell a friend what descriptive feedback looks like and sounds like.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Guided Practice – Peer Assessment**

The next day, Mrs. Johnson has her students practise the process of giving and receiving feedback by having them work with a peer. As a class they select a few simple activities (such as writing their names or marching in place) and co-construct a short list of success criteria for each activity which they record on the blackboard. Then one partner engages in one of the activities and the other partner gives descriptive feedback about his or her performance based on the criteria they have co-constructed.

To help students with this activity, Mrs. Johnson provides the following three prompts for them to use when giving each other descriptive feedback:

1. One thing you did well was ...
2. One thing you could improve was ...
3. You could improve this by ...

After each student has had a chance to give and receive feedback on the activity, the paired students assess the descriptive feedback itself using the success criteria they had co-constructed as a class. Students use this assessment to reflect on their own achievement of the learning goal about descriptive feedback.
In the following days and weeks, Mrs. Johnson continues to establish a classroom atmosphere that encourages open, supportive, student and teacher-led dialogue about descriptive feedback and self-assessment. She continues to use the co-constructed success criteria for giving and receiving descriptive feedback with her students and together they refine and add to the criteria. Mrs. Johnson uses a variety of strategies and tools to explicitly model, and provide opportunities for practicing, descriptive feedback.

Some of her strategies and tools include the following:

- Conferencing to help teachers and students identify growth in assessment as learning skills
- Daily exit cards to help students reflect on their attainment of the learning goals daily

**Communicating the Learning**

Mrs. Johnson wants her students’ parents and guardians to understand how important assessment as learning is to student learning. In her Program Night presentation, she includes examples of assessment and the power of descriptive feedback in developing the habits of mind that are needed to be a self-aware, life-long learner.

In her regular newsletters throughout the year she will include information and suggestions to parents on how they can support their children’s developing skills in self-assessment and be active partners in their children’s progress.

Mrs. Johnson’s ultimate goal is that all of her students will learn to use descriptive feedback to improve their own learning, consider next steps for their learning, and set specific individual goals.
Works Cited


Resources for Further Learning

From AER GAINS:

Self-Assessment Video Series
Descriptive Feedback Video Series
eModule: Assessment for and as Learning

From Research Literature:

