Focus Question:
How can we make better judgements about student learning?

Making Good Judgements
These research extracts explore some threats to the validity of our judgements on students’ learning. Reaching common understandings about assessment and being consistent is important, but not enough. Assessment must also be valid, recorded efficiently and embedded in everyday practice.

Equity Validity
One way that the validity of our assessment practices can be threatened is when we, as teachers, exhibit unintended bias. Bias can occur in any of four basic areas.

“Language Usage. Our language is often not transparent; we unconsciously assume others understand what we mean, when in reality, the words we use evoke very different responses from those with whom we are attempting to communicate.”

The words we use in our assessment tasks may be interpreted quite differently by some students, not only, but particularly, students who have a heritage, or first, language other than English.

“Stereotypes. With stereotypes we make assumptions about general qualities based on limited specific exposure. When we assume “[Papuans] are primitive and backward” it may be the case that we have never even met [a Papuan] but we have seen some television show or read a National Geographic magazine article.” Some students may feel outraged by our ignorance yet never challenge us on it.

“Representational Fairness. Often in educational materials (i.e. textbooks, standardized tests) there is an under-representation of girls and women, minorities, elders, and people with disabilities. In the same materials there is an over-representation of middle class white males.” This can carry into our assessment tasks where there is an over-representation of some groups, and an under-representation of others, resulting in many students feeling that the assessment does not include their lives.

“Content Inclusiveness. For an assessment to be useful, the content of that assessment has to be relevant, especially with issues of culture, gender, and historical information.” (pages 115-6)

Not only do students need to feel included, the contexts within which we choose to set our multi-domain, and other assessment tasks, also need to be selected so that they are relevant to students’ lives. If these facets of equity validity are attended to as we design the assessment task, then we have a greater chance of finding that we have been fair to all students when we analyse the data after the assessment has been ‘marked’ - i.e. a greater chance of ensuring equity validity.

Validity and Feedback
“Feedback is one of the central components of assessment for learning. If feedback is defined in terms of ‘closing the gap’ between actual and desired performance then the key consequential validity issue is whether this has occurred … While we can give feedback that is intended to help the learner to close the gap, this may not necessarily happen … For feedback in the classroom, the following play an important role in the establishment of valid feedback:

* It is clearly linked to the learning intention;
* the learner understands the success criteria/standard;
* It gives cues at appropriate levels on how to bridge the gap:
  a) self regulatory/metacognitive [e.g. encouraging persistence will result in more effort]
  b) process/deep learning [e.g. good feedback helps students see what they can do to improve]
  c) task/surface learning [e.g. feedback identifies where the task has not been addressed well]
• It focuses on the task rather than the learner (self/ego);
• It challenges, requires action, and is achievable.” (page 141)


*** Keeping Records of Assessment ***

“The level of detail required [in assessment records] should depend on the purpose for which the record is being maintained. If too much detail is included, intelligibility and manageability is compromised, end users are unable to see the wood for the trees, and you are unlikely to be able to keep the records up to date … Of course, the old computer adage GIGO (Garbage In - Garbage Out) still applies whether the system is paper-based or computer-based.” (p. 39)


Records of assessment should be:

• valid, in that they assess children against appropriate learning objectives
• reliable, in that they can be trusted to indicate knowledge which is secure, and not forgotten shortly after the assessment
• useful for communication with parents about children’s progress
• helpful when making judgements against the … [Standards]
• useful for long term planning
• manageable.” (p. 103)


*** Collaborating on Assessment Decisions ***

“As teachers struggle with the challenge of providing descriptions of their students’ learning, they find themselves doubting their judgement and suggestions. These doubts are no different from what teachers have experienced for years. They ask themselves questions such as ‘How sure am I that I am right?’ and ‘How much confidence do I have that I’m giving a fair and accurate picture of this student?’ One of the most powerful ways to gain confidence in assessment decisions is to share them.”


*** Developing a process for changing assessment practices ***

“Schools often start to review current practice by asking three questions:

• Where are we now?
• Where do we want to be?
• How will we get there?

If these are used to review current assessment practice throughout the school, similarities and differences in practice can be identified, reasons for successes and failures analysed and other ways of working identified. The results can lead to a draft plan for action that suits the needs of the school. After consultation this plan can become part of the school development plan and form the basis of the agreed policy on assessment.” (page 123)


*** Reflection Question: ***

How can we collaborate in our school to have common understandings of assessment and make better judgements about students’ progress against the Standards?