



## Aligning formative and summative assessments: A collaborative action research challenging teacher conceptions

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### ABSTRACT

Assessment innovations require explicitly challenging teachers' assessment conceptions. In changing towards outcome-based curricula, aligning formative to new summative assessments is a challenge. This study, conducted in Dutch Agricultural Vocational Education and its new outcome-based summative assessments, aims to provide concrete insights into what teacher conceptions hinder the development of aligned formative assessment practices. In a structured collaborative action research, practitioners, researchers and consultants analyse teachers' formative practices, identify underlying current conceptions and their misalignment to the new summative assessment system. An iterative process resulted in an overview of current conceptions versus required conceptions, showing required conceptual changes that are prerequisite for teachers to change towards formative assessment practices that are aligned to the new outcome-based summative assessment system.

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### Aligning formative and summative assessments through teacher conceptions

Many countries are changing educational practices towards outcome-based curricula, in which professionally relevant outcomes define the qualifications of educational programmes without prescribing any specific learning pathway or resources (Young, 2009a). This is in sharp contrast with traditional or input-based curricula, in which qualifications are tied to specific forms of teaching, learning and assessments, such as prescribed teaching methods and books, a lesson period or time served at an internship (Young, 2009a). Young (2009a,b) reviewed many nationally developed outcome-based frameworks as well as problems that arise with implementing them. One of the biggest challenges in this context is the drastic changes in assessment practices towards more open, performance-oriented types of assessment that show competence in the professionally relevant outcomes (i.e., the qualifications). A specific problem is finding an alignment between summative and formative assessment practices (Crooks, 2011; Knight, 2000; Taras, 2005). Where the summative assessments are often nationally defined in correspondence to the nationally defined outcome-based qualification profiles, formative assessment practices are the responsibility of individual schools or even

individual teachers, therefore often referred to as classroom-assessments or teacher-assessments (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, Stobart, & Montgomery, 2010). In an aligned outcome-based curriculum, with a high quality assessment programme (Knight, 2000), the formative assessments reflect learning activities that appropriately prepare students for the summative assessment of the outcomes and offer them, and their teachers, opportunities to diagnose where students are in relation to the outcomes assessed in the summative assessment (Knight, 2000; Wiliam, 2011; Yorke, 2003). A proper alignment between summative assessment practices and preceding formative assessments has proven to be crucial for effective student learning as well as for assessment quality (Gulikers, Kester, Kirschner, & Bastiaens, 2008; Knight, 2000; Segers & Dochy, 2006; Shavelson et al., 2008). Thus, formative - teacher - assessments should change along with summative assessment innovations. This study aims to provide deeper insight into what teacher conceptions hinder the development of formative assessment practices that are aligned to a new outcome-based summative assessment framework.

Teachers play a crucial role in whether or not an educational innovation will actually be implemented sustainably (Ayala et al., 2008; De Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Davis, Beyer, Forbes, & Stevens, 2011; Gardner et al., 2010). In the context of changing assessment practices, teachers' assessment conceptions can hinder implementation of assessment innovations if their conceptions are not changed along with the underlying ideas of the educational innovation (Ayala et al., 2008; Brown, 2004; Webb & Jones, 2009; Yorke, 2003). Teacher professional development regarding new ways of assessment is lacking behind or has even been taken for

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granted too much (Ayala et al., 2008; De Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Smith, 2011; Webb & Jones, 2009). Moreover, professional development in assessment is often characterised by an instrumental approach, like an off-the-job training on “new assessment instruments”, without challenging underlying understandings and conceptions and viewing assessment as part of the whole educational system and the specific innovation at hand (O’Leary, 2008; Tierney, 2006; Wilson, 2008). Several studies (Ayala et al., 2008; Brown, 2004; Brown, Kennedy, Fok, & Chan, 2009; Segers & Tillema, 2011; Smith, 2011) have shown that teachers do not hold assessment conceptions that fit new approaches to assessment, and thus, *that* teachers’ assessment conceptions should change. These studies provide some generic information about *what* should change, for example, conceiving assessment not only as assessment *of* learning, but also as assessment *for* learning. However, these generic, theoretical, insights will not automatically result in changing teachers’ assessment conceptions and practices. What is lacking is what these generic conceptual changes concretely mean for teachers in a specific assessment innovation context in practice (Torrance & Pryor, 2001). Changing teachers’ conceptions requires actively involving teachers in understanding their current assessment conceptions and gaining insight in required conceptions for a specific assessment innovation within their own context (Ayala et al., 2008).

### The present study

The context of this study is Dutch Agricultural Vocational Education and Training, (AVET), as part of the larger Dutch VET system (Mulder & Kupper, 2006), that has changed from a traditional, input-based curriculum to a competence-based curriculum (i.e., a form of outcome-based) based on new nationally defined competence profiles (i.e. the outcomes). In AVET, this was accompanied by the development of a new National Summative Assessment Framework (NSAF). All summative assessments of the NSAF assess students’ performance of the outcomes in job-relevant activities observed in the workplace (i.e., during internships) combined with critical reflective interviews (see Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2009, for an elaborate description of these summative assessments). As such, these summative assessments are different from those reported in many other countries (Gardner et al., 2010; Gulikers & Mulder, 2013; Klenowski, 2011; Popham, 2008). In most countries, national summative assessments, mostly high-stakes, are criticised for being too standardised and too much focused on lower levels of cognitive functioning and as a result inhibit formative assessment practices that promote student learning and students’ performance of relevant authentic tasks. All AVET schools and individual teachers, independently and on their own responsibility, develop formative assessments preceding these new summative assessments of the NSAF. There are no guidelines or collaborative decisions on the content or form of these formative assessments. In line with experiences in other contexts (e.g. Dysthe, Engelsen & Lima, 2007; James & McCormick, 2009) this resulted in a wide variety of formative assessment practices preceding a summative assessment from the NSAF, ranging from discipline-specific paper-and-pencil tests or orals to skills tests conducted in internships or reflection reports, but also times served at an internship or attendance during a certain lesson period could be included as part of the formative assessment. The misalignment between many of these formative assessment practices and the new summative assessment framework was previously identified as problematic and threatening assessment quality and student learning (Gulikers et al., 2009). This problem of misalignment is shown for example in students evaluations of the summative assessment in which they argued that they were not well prepared for their summative assessment (see Gulikers

et al., 2009). Within this context, the main research question is: what conceptual changes are identified as prerequisite for changing teachers’ formative assessment practices to be more in line with the new outcome-based summative assessment framework.

To answer this research question, this study adopts a collaborative action research approach (McNiff, 2002; Meijer, Meirink, Lockhorst, & Oolbekkink-Marchand, 2010; Torrance & Pryor, 2001) with practitioners, academics and consultants, and bottom-up alternated with top-down activities to first examine teachers’ current formative assessment practices for the purpose of illuminate current underlying conceptions (Seezink, 2009) and second to reflect on their (mis)alignment to the ideas underlying the new summative assessment system. The ultimate aim of the study is to collaboratively develop a concrete, but transferable, overview of current conceptions on the one hand and required conceptions in the outcome-based summative assessment system on the other hand. This overview shows conceptual changes that are prerequisite for teachers to change towards formative assessment practices that are aligned to the new outcome-based summative assessment system.

Both the outcomes (i.e., the identified required conceptual changes) and the process (i.e., the characteristics of the collaborative action research setup) of this study can be exemplary for challenging and changing teachers assessment conceptions and practices in the context of an outcome-based assessment innovation.

### Methods

#### Participants

The National Summative Assessment Framework (NSAF) is obligatory for all AVET schools. These are 12 institutions offering professional education to 60,000 students for practical jobs in the life-sciences sector like gardener, floral designer or veterinarian assistant (Mulder & Kupper, 2006). Within this context, several participant groups were involved in this study: (1) the primary practitioner participants are eleven examination secretaries from nine AVET schools (this is 75% of the AVET schools in The Netherlands). Examination secretaries, instead of teachers, were purposefully chosen as primary participants for this study as they have an overview of all assessment practices within a school, they have teaching experience themselves, and they have the responsibility to quality assure the schools assessment practices conducted by all teachers. As such, they could offer a more representative picture of formative assessment practices within the participating AVET schools than an at random selection of teachers; (2) a large number of teachers were indirectly involved as the examination secretaries involved representative teachers within their AVET institution for data collection and reflection in several stages of this project; (3) three educational researchers with expertise in vocational education, the education innovation of competence-based education and the NSAF in AVET participated as one source of external, top-down information. Two of them, as well as the researcher guiding the whole project (i.e., first author), have published peer reviewed articles on competence-based education and assessment in the (A)VET context. Additionally, they all had practical experience in working with AVET teachers and they were involved in the (political) discussions on or development of competence-based education and the NSAF. (4) Ten educational consultants participated as a second source of external, top-down information. These were all senior consultants having more than ten years of experience with AVET teachers, with a focus on helping them to implement competence-based education.

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