

**Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?**

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## Abstract

Assessment for learning has been hailed as an assessment practice that can improve achievement in learners. Research has proved that to be true. However, most of this research has been carried out with normally developing students and those with mild disabilities to prove its effectiveness, but there has been very little done with students with complex intellectual learning difficulties and disabilities. This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of assessment for learning in these students and the perceptions of those educators who work with them.

An interpretive case study was undertaken in one school which had committed to use assessment for learning with such students. Data was collected from interviews carried out with ten participants; two senior managers, five teachers and two teacher aides. Data collection was triangulated by also reviewing documents, such as school policies, journal entries, reflection notes, teacher planning and professional development minutes. Video evidence from classroom practices was also reviewed to add to the data collected. The data analysis was informed by discourse analysis, thematic and constant comparative strategies, which were completed using the data analysis software Nvivo. Themes, patterns and relationships were identified. Methodological triangulation enhanced the validation of the data analysis.

It was perceived by the participants in this study that assessment for learning was one of the most effective ways to assist learning and enhance engagement, involvement, participation, communication and autonomy in students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Furthermore, it allows collaboration and partnership between the student and the teacher in the learning process. However, it was found out that for this strategy to be effective with this group of learners, adjustments, adaptations and accommodations are required to assist learners to access and navigate through the process of AFL meaningfully. Participants spent a fair amount of time exploring strategies and tools which assisted and scaffolded students in the accessing assessment for learning.

This research contributed to the understanding of the use of assessment for learning with learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. It justifies that assessment for learning is a collaborative participatory strategy that allows students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities to take some control of their lives and shape their own destinies. It also gives insights as to why total inclusion has

been hard to achieve because of the time and effort constraints it puts on mainstream teachers who are already burdened by large classes. Another significance of the study is that practice and meaning making is highly situated and therefore building teacher capacity is paramount and it takes time. The findings of this study should help policy makers, school administrators and Educational officers to understand the demands on teacher time, expertise and capacity that is required when employing assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities.

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## List of Abbreviations

AFL – Assessment for learning

ADHD-Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

ARG – Assessment Reform Group

CLDD- complex learning difficulties and disabilities

HF-Higher functioning

IEP – Individual educational Plan

LF-Lower functioning

KMOFAP – Kings Medway Oxford Formative Assessment Project

MOE – Ministry of Education

NZC – New Zealand Curriculum

PECS- Picture Exchange Communication Systems

QLCs- Quality Learning Circles

SM-Senior manager

TA-Teacher aide

TR-teacher

## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), or referenced, no materials which to a substantial extent has been submitted for an award of any degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed by.....

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores how special educators feel about the effectiveness of assessment for learning in students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD).

Therefore, this introductory chapter lays out the overview of this research investigation. The context and background of the study are introduced and described. Secondly, the purpose and relevance of the investigation are outlined. The research questions are then introduced and brief insight of the methodology of the research is given. Lastly, the chapter concludes by outlining the chapters of the thesis.

### **1.1. The context of the study**

*“Effective assessment is a key component of quality teaching and essential for raising student achievement” (Sewell, as cited in Ministry of Education position paper:assessment; 2011, p2).*

Sewell expounds the above statement by explaining that assessment in New Zealand does not rely on national testing but heavily relies on teacher professional judgments, AFL (written as assessment for learning) principles and practice and on sharing the information with students in order to improve their learning. Although the government has introduced national standards, assessment still relies heavily on assessment for learning principles, which place students at the centre of the assessment process and uses feedback and dialogue to enhance teaching and learning, The New Zealand school context is becoming increasingly more diverse; therefore, there is need to respond appropriately and effectively to this diversity, in order to meet the needs of those learners who are usually marginalised by both the system and society. Apart from cultural diversity, there is also a rise in our schools in a considerable number of learners who have complex learning difficulties and disabilities that need to be considered in the differentiation of assessment practice. These students are also usually marginalised.

According to the national organisation on disability Harris Survey (National Organisation on Disability, 1998), many people living with disabilities in America felt that society treated them as needy, unable and tragic. As a person who works with disabled students, I have encountered these same attitudes in our own New Zealand society and schools. Although over the years, these attitudes have reduced and/or are not displayed publicly, there are still many people in society who harbour them, even in

the education sector. This calls for inclusive and informative assessment practices (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins & Reid, 2009). Learners come to school with a wide range of backgrounds and needs, as well as experiences, therefore engaging them as active participants in assessment processes and conversations, where they feel respected and are given opportunities to present and have their contributions and perceptions on their efforts and achievements heard, will go a long way in furthering this aspiration of establishing formative and inclusive assessment (Absolum, 2009).

Furthermore, the way teachers assess students affects both the teachers and students' on-going view of learning. This warrants that teachers reflect on their own perceptions about assessment and assessment practices to result in a shift in thinking that leads to improving their teaching, as well as viewing assessment as a method to improve students' learning. While teachers are very much aware of the impact of assessment on students' learning, there is limited understanding of how the teachers attitudes, beliefs and perspectives shape the students' identity of themselves as learners (Aschbacher, 1994; Pollard, 1997). The beliefs that teachers hold as well as the assessment practices they use help create messages that shape the learning identity of students (Willis, 2011). As a consequence, there is need to use interactive assessment practices such as AFL to motivate learners and help shape positive beliefs which will carry them through life as they pursue to be active and confident lifelong learners (Ministry of Education, 2007).

AFL is situated in the constructivist paradigm, where learners are regarded as active participants in their own learning. The focus in this paradigm of assessment is on the learning process, feedback, evaluation and other key AFL practices such as modelling, scaffolding, self-and-peer-assessment, co-construction of success criteria and active reflection, as learners construct and re-construct their own understanding and learning styles. AFL practices achieve substantial validity when they assist learners to identify their own learning capabilities and trajectories, through receiving formative feedback, thereby bridging the gap between where they are at in their learning and where they desire to be (Stobart, 2008). This is where teachers need to critically reflect on their perspectives and give learners the power to construct their learning destinies, while being supported by their teachers and peers. For this goal to be achieved teachers should endeavour to adopt the divergent approach to AFL, which aims to discover student capabilities and then use a range of strategies to improve them through questioning, feedback, discussions, prompting, reflecting, use of success criteria, self-and-peer-assessment (Torrance and Pryor, 1998). These divergent approaches demand the

involvement of learners as initiators and co-constructors of their own assessments as well as recipients of it.

However, this is problematic when trying to implement AFL practices with students with CLDD. These learners are described by Carpenter, Cockbill, Wiggett and Eggerton (2012) as learners whose difficulties co-exist, for example, having autism which co-occurs with attention difficult/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or Downs' syndrome together with foetal alcohol syndrome. These authors also asserted that learners with CLDD may also include learners with multiple disabilities which include mental, health, physical and visual disabilities; as well as difficulties that emanate from premature birth (Pritchard, Clark, Liberty, Champion, Wilson & Woodward, 2009). Many of these learners are also affected with amalgamating factors such as rare chromosomal disorders, genetic factors, multisensory impairments, behaviour problems as well as cognitive deficits. These scenarios challenge educators in that the learning profiles of these students may not fit into the traditional, or even the usual contemporary learning environments, teaching and learning pedagogies, as well as curriculum models. (Department of Education, 2011)

Consequently, this raises questions on how to use current assessment strategies such as AFL effectively with this group of students. As a teacher who was chosen to participate in the pilot study of assessment for learning with such students in our school, I became interested in this research topic.

### **1.2. Background of Study**

The inspiration that triggered this investigation was a critical inquisitiveness that started at the beginning of our two year professional development programme which prepared us for the job that was ahead of us. When I was chosen I did not know that we were going to engage in AFL practices. During our first season of seminars, I discovered that it was AFL that we were going to implement and my heart just fell. I leaned to one of my colleagues and said to her, "this is a waste of time, because it is not going to work with our students". Surprisingly, she readily agreed with me, so I was rest assured in the comfort of numbers. I sat through the first day of seminar very much unmotivated.

This attitude of mine had come from previous negative experiences which I had gone through. When I joined the school as a new internationally trained teacher, I was introduced to AFL with someone who was not confident in using it herself. She just followed the "letter" of AFL and so it did not work with me at all. I went through the

first day of seminar, unmotivated and with negativity. This professional development was a two year intensive training programme which was being funded by the Ministry of Education and there were twelve schools involved. Of the twelve, ours was the only special needs school and the rest were regular primary schools. This situation, confirmed my beliefs that AFL does not work with learners with special needs, let alone those with CLDD.

However, as most teachers do, at the end of the day, I started reflecting on what we had learnt at the seminar and I experienced a profound moment. I realised that, although I regarded myself an experienced and very good special education practitioner, my attitude was all wrong. In that moment of shame, I decided to learn more about AFL. I therefore started by reading Black and Williams (2001) 'Inside the black box,' an article which I had downloaded online. As I ploughed through this article, I became excited, when I recognised that practices such as sharing learning intentions, strategic questioning, feedback, and self-and-peer-assessment were all part of the AFL practices which enhanced students' achievement. These authors claimed that these practices improved learning outcomes especially in those students who performed at a low level, such as our own students who were not expected to achieve anything according to societal perceptions of them. This revelation piqued my enthusiasm and desire to try these practices in order to prove their validity.

Black and Wiliam (2006) asserted that the adoption of AFL by teachers is recognised as more complex than implementing techniques with existing classroom practices. Teacher beliefs about learning and assessment (James & Pedder,2006) were claimed to have an impact on how learning was constructed within classroom AFL practices. Marshall and Drummond (2006, p.137) reported that only one fifth of all the lessons they observed in their study embraced the "spirit" of AFL which empowers students to take ownership of their own learning in order to promote autonomy. Eighty percent of the lessons adopted the "letter" of AFL which entails merely following processes just for the sake of it. This seemed like it was going to be me, and so I decided to change my attitude.

In my quest to improve, I read Michael Absolum's (2006) book, 'Clarity in the classroom', which illuminated my understanding of AFL process. From this moment forward, my attitudes, beliefs and perspectives on AFL changed and I became motivated to give it a try. I started exploring ways of making AFL accessible to my students, which began to yield positive results. I was so excited that I shared my success with everybody. However, not everybody was as excited as I was.

Later, in my job as lead teacher, I observed and engaged in conversations about the changes that teachers experienced in implementing and involving learners with CLDD in AFL processes. Even though, I had attended the two year in-depth professional development programme, all the examples and vignettes were of normally developing students. I still had questions on its implementation and effectiveness. When we asked our facilitators questions about how we could implement it with our learners, they had no clue. I therefore embarked on my own research to find out what research was in the field about this phenomenon. I was not surprised to find that there was very little research in this area. This remained as bother, at the back of my mind.

During the professional development, I found out that I had to work much harder than my mainstream counterparts in trying to find ways of implementing AFL in my class. Whereas, they had to just interpret it and follow the process very easily, I had to explore ways in which to present it meaningfully so that my students could access and understand it. It took a lot of time trialling these strategies before I was satisfied by their effectiveness. This demand on teacher time, expertise and capabilities was what resulted in us meeting with significant resistance from some of our colleagues in the school. They were not willing to exert so much effort and time into something they were not convinced about. As a consequence, this further motivated me to engage in this investigation. In order to explore this phenomenon, I decided to conduct an interpretative, qualitative case study at my school which is in the North Island of New Zealand and which had decided to have a go at using AFL principles with their students who had CLDD.

### **1.3. Purpose of study and research questions.**

This study investigated the paradox of how special educators perceive the effectiveness of AFL in the learning of students with CLDD. The reason being, if teachers have positive attitudes and beliefs about something and are persuaded of its worth, it is easier for them to follow it through. Klenwoski (2009) defines AFL as everyday practice in which student, teachers and their peers seek, reflect upon and respond to information which they gain from learning conversations, experiences and observations in order to enhance ongoing learning. This means that as learners interact with their teachers and peers in their social environment, they would gather information through their learning experiences and observation, which they would then use to enhance their learning. This would only be successful if the principles of assessment for learning are followed. Other researchers such as Absolum (2006) and Wiliam (2009) articulate that the above can be

achieved through sharing learning intentions, co-construction of success criteria, strategic questioning, giving and receiving feedback, self-and-peer-assessment and deep active reflection. However, students with CLDD have problems in carrying out most of these because most of them have intellectual and communication disabilities. The problem was how then can one implement this strategy with these students and how effective can it be. This investigation was therefore guided by the key question which is:

*What are special needs educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of AFL in students with CLDD?*

This question enabled the researcher to delve deep into the educators' minds and practices in order to find out their perceptions. The remaining two questions stir the focus towards the practicalities and challenges of implementing AFL with this group of learners and these are:

*Can these students access AFL like every other learner? If not, what can be done?*

*What methods and tools can be used to enhance AFL with learners with CLDD?*

#### **1.4. Relevance of study**

AFL is at the helm of the assessment policy in New Zealand (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, & Reid, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2011) and is also an area of international research interest which aims to enhance accountability in assessment (Gardener, Harlen, Hayward & Stobart, 2008). The belief that AFL can increase students' achievement is well researched and documented (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; James & Pedder, 2006; The Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Research has also been carried out to show how AFL can have a positive impact on learner engagement, motivation and autonomy (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003; Hayward & Spencer, 2010; Willis, 2011). However, most of this research was done with learners living without disabilities. There is very little research that has been done on the use of AFL with learners with disabilities (Porter, Robertson, & Mayhole, 2000; Shute, Hansen, & Almond, 2007; Watkins & D'Allesio, 2009). These researchers worked with learners with mild disabilities and profound disabilities but not those with CLDD. What is problematic within this research is that although they looked at certain aspects of AFL and/or used modified versions of AFL, but none of them delved into the practicality of implementing holistic AFL practices with learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities and how effective it might be. In this era, where inclusion is

being emphasised, there is real need that these learners be able to access whatever form of instruction and learning is present in any given environment.

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding that teacher's perspectives, beliefs and attitudes matter in how effectively AFL can be implemented with learners with very complex needs. It also seeks to contribute to the knowledge base and research of inclusive education by giving strategies and methods on how to implement AFL effectively with learners with CLDD. This research is the first that attempts to tackle the practicality of implementing AFL with these students in order to enhance engagement, participation, involvement, reflection and autonomy. Hargreaves (2006) asserted that without engagement and participation there is no deep learning, effective teaching or the attainment of meaningful achievement and quality progress (Carpenter, 2010b). The results of this study can have implications for and inform the work of teachers, researchers, policy makers and students on how to tackle practical and contextual issues that enhance AFL practices in classroom and schools.

### **1.5. Methodology**

A qualitative interpretive case study was undertaken in order to fully investigate the research question. This methodology was chosen because of its ontological assumption that multiple realities exist (Creswell, 2013; Guba, 2008; Lichtman, 2010), and that as participants engaged with the use of AFL in their classrooms, they formed their own realities, meanings and truths on how effective it is with students with CLDD. These methodologies are grounded in the interpretive paradigm which believes that these multiple realities and truths that are gained (Angen, 2006) through social constructions and shared meanings, hence the research lends itself to constructivism (Clegg & Slife, 2009; Ponterotto, 2005). A decision to conduct insider research was made because of the nature of the students and the research context which required a person who knew and understood the dynamics of students and site (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Burke & Kirton, 2006). Data was gathered through interviews and reviewing documents, as well as audio-visual images (Angen, 2006; Hindmarsh & Tutt, 2012; Lichtman, 2010). Finally the data was analysed using the qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo, which allowed the researcher to code all sources and to create queries which helped answer questions about the data, thereby bringing clarity to the findings (see appendix E).

## **1.6. Thesis outline**

This thesis is organised in six chapters. The first chapter introduces the study and it gives a brief overview of AFL in the New Zealand assessment policy context as well as situating learners with CLDD in that context. It also gives the background, purpose and significance of the study. Chapter two reviews the literature underpinning the research topic. A great deal of literature was reviewed in the preliminary stages of this thesis, in order to provide a context and overview of the study. It reviews the historical background of AFL as well as exploring a range of definitions before settling on a working one for the study. Recent AFL literature was explored to see how it enhanced learner autonomy, involvement, reflection and the role of feedback. Furthermore, this chapter explores literature that illuminates to the reader, what kind of learner this student with CLDD is and it also gives a brief description of research done on how they learn. Lastly, the chapter reviews the few research projects that were undertaken on AFL and learners with disabilities. Chapter three gives the description of the research design including the rationale for the research framework and methods used. It also includes a discussion of the plausibility of data and findings and lastly the ethical considerations associated with the study are then detailed. The findings of the study are narrated in chapter four with the evidence that came from the interviews and documents and videos that were reviewed. Chapter five then discusses the major conclusions of the study in light of key literature in the field. The final chapter presents the conclusions together with the implications, limitations and recommendations of this research inquiry.

## **1.7. Conclusion**

If the students with complex learning needs are to become equal citizens whose rights are recognised in society, they need to be afforded the same educational opportunities as everybody else. Since assessment is central to effective learning, inclusive assessment practices such as assessment for learning needs to be explored and implemented effectively in order for these learners to access meaningful learning. This thesis endeavours to open pathways for other researchers in this field, of the effectiveness of the use of assessment for learning, starting with a review of the limited literature that is there on the subject.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **2.1. The New Zealand perspective of Assessment**

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) is underpinned by the philosophy that recognises heterogeneity of the New Zealand society and therefore aims to cater for diversity in all its forms. There are various aspects to this diversity, including from culture, language, identity, and abilities. . The New Zealand Curriculum document states that every young person and child under the age of 19 has a right to attend school at their local school without discrimination of any kind (The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007). It is therefore imperative that the local school adapts its systems in order to cater for this diversity. Section 8 of the 1989 Education act states that “people who have special education needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education at state schools as do people who do not” (Ministry of Education, 1989, p.52). This is affirmed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which articulated human rights, including the right to education for all children and young people regardless of ethnicity, gender, colour, ability, religious and social background (United Nations, 1989). This statement shows the government’s commitment for equal education opportunities and inclusion for all citizens.

However, in New Zealand, although there is a commitment on paper for inclusion and equal education for all, there are not enough structures and strategies put in place to achieve this. This dilemma probably comes from the way inclusion and equal educational opportunities are regarded. MacArthur (2009) asserts that all students need to be allowed to attend their regular local school, to participate fully and benefit from that environment and to achieve to the best of their ability. This is emphasized by Dalziel (2001) in the New Zealand Disability Strategy which states that learners with disabilities should not be “denied access to their local regular schools...” (p.16). However, this is problematic in that, as discovered by Morton & McMenamin (2010), teachers in regular schools are finding it difficult to include some learners with special educational needs in their planning, teaching and assessment because they are not knowledgeable about how to meet the needs of these learners.. There could be a number of factors causing this, including:

- Until recently, inclusive education was not included in teacher training programs, so these teachers may lack the expertise and effective pedagogies of teaching and assessing such learners
- Class sizes may be another factor because some of these learners require a lot of adaptations and modifications to the environment and teaching strategies, as well as differentiated teaching, in order for them to effectively access the curriculum. This is time consuming if one has a big class and not adequate support.
- A deficit view of disability and failure to see these learners as capable and competent learners in their own right, which is displayed by some teachers and communities, may be another constraining factor.

If these factors are not addressed and the notion of equity (Grey, 2013) which refers to the inclusive practices that relate to fairness, justness, impartiality and even-handedness (Graham and MacArthur, 2012), inclusive education might be just in word or on paper in New Zealand. If one wanders in the playgrounds of our regular schools, you cannot help but see this solitary child playing in the corner of the playground because they do not fit, and or because they are being labelled “handicapped” (referring to their physical or mental disability) or naughty because they behave in a different way (they have autism or behavioural issues). Furthermore, a student with disabilities might be sent to the back of the classroom with blocks to keep them quiet or sent outside to do some chores with the teacher aide because they are disturbing the rest of the class (MacArthur, 2009). This trend of actions is synonymous to the complaints listed in article 15 to the Human Rights Commission (Human Rights Commission, 2009). The culture of equity and inclusion is still far from being achieved, firstly in our teachers and then in our communities as a whole. There is a real need for a shift in values, beliefs and attitudes at the local schooling level which will in turn influence the design and implementation of inclusive policy changes in institutions because the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) mandated schools to interpret and implement local curriculums which best meet the needs of their learners.

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) sets the direction for learning and informs the design of each local curriculum, meaning that each school decides how best to interpret and implement it in a way that ensures that teaching and learning focuses on helping students gain knowledge and skills that cover the breadth of the curriculum. The NZC (2007) is developed around key competencies and values

which were identified as the important tenets for lifelong learning and participatory citizenship (Ministry of Education, 2011). This therefore, ensures that local curriculums meet the particular needs, interests, and circumstances of their students. Classroom teachers, in turn, develop their own classroom-based curriculums, assessment policies, processes and practices around it. In its position paper on assessment, the MOE (2011) asserts that “effective assessment is a key component of quality teaching and learning when used as a learning process to inform teaching and learning.....” (p.7). Connelly & Clandinin (1988) claim that curriculum and teacher identities are evolving entities that interact with each other to define the future of learning and teaching, such as assessment.

In its assessment statement the NZC (2007) sets out some fundamentals which point out effective assessment as that which :

- benefits and involves students
- supports teaching and learning goals
- is planned for and communicated
- is suited for the purpose
- is valid and fair. (p.40)

This statement reveals that students are at the centre of the assessment and the teaching inquiry process (Directions for Assessment in New Zealand, 2009).

Assessment is therefore not divorced from teaching and learning, but is an integral part of it. In this way, assessment for learning can be regarded as the guiding lens to quality teaching and learning.

The New Zealand assessment policy is underpinned by assessment for learning principles. For years now New Zealand assessment has shifted from assessment of learning (end point testing) and is focussed on assessment as a means of improving teaching and learning (assessment for learning). The 2011 Ministry of Education position paper on assessment, describes it as a process of learning for learning which if undertaken effectively could be used to gather valuable information to inform teaching and learning. They also assert that it is a way in which we check that learning is taking place, or has taken place, so that decisions can be made on what needs to happen next. Assessment looks back and looks forward in order to give feedback and feed forward which promotes further learning. This description is in agreement with the definition of

assessment for learning given by the Assessment Reform Group (2002), which describes it as the process by which teachers and students seek and interpret evidence for use in their teaching and learning, next steps and how to get there.

This project seeks to investigate the perceptions of educators on the usefulness of Assessment for learning (AFL) in learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD). In order to fully explore this phenomenon, there is need to fully understand what AFL and CLDD is.

## **2.2. Historical background and definition of Assessment for Learning**

Assessment for learning started off as formative assessment which has its roots in the work of Benjamin Bloom's studies on individual differences. It has since evolved from these early studies through the work of researchers such as Frederic Burk (as cited in Wiliam, 2011), Ramaprasad (1983), Weiner (1948) and Black and Wiliam (1998) to the model of assessment for learning that is being advocated by the Ministry of Education (2011) and Michael Absolum (2009). It took prominence after Black and Wiliam conducted a literature survey and published "Inside the Black Box." The lessons learnt during that time were pivotal to sparking the interest which later developed in formative assessment and assessment for learning.

Defining assessment for learning is rather problematic because some authors use assessment for learning and formative assessment interchangeably (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2004 ; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004), while others such as the Assessment Reform Group (2002), Bennett (2009), Broadfoot, Daugherty, Gardner, Harlen, James & Stobart (2002) and Klenowski (2009) prefer to use the term assessment for learning. The Assessment Reform Group believes that formative assessment is open to a wide range of interpretations which are confusing. They assert that formative assessment is an assessment that is planned and frequently carried out at the time of instruction to inform teachers how to proceed and where to give more feedback or plan more teaching or remedial work. They argue that such assessments fall short of the aspects that make it assessment for learning (which is helping learning). Formative assessment may help the teacher to see where more assistance is required or where the gaps are both during teaching and in summative assessments, whereas AFL is conducted with the intention of improving learning and the process of the teaching/learning inquiry. Therefore, for the purpose of this investigation the term assessment for learning (AFL) is going to be used.

In this investigation these formative assessment and assessment for learning are not used interchangeably.

AFL was therefore defined by a range of researchers as a group of practices which was not merely an adjunct to teaching and learning but that offered students' involvement in assessment featured as part of teaching (James & Pedder, 2006). Klenowski (2009) delved deeper by explaining that AFL is part of everyday practices which enable teachers, learners and their peers to “ seek, reflect and respond to information from dialogue, demonstrations and observations in ways that enhance ongoing learning” (p.264). Furthermore, the Assessment Reform Group (2002) defined AFL as the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by the learners and their teachers in order to make decisions on where the learners are at in their learning, where they need to go and how best they can get there. One thing that is common in these definitions is that they regard AFL as a vehicle for promoting, improving and furthering learning during every day practices while regarding the student as central participants in the teaching learning partnership

According to Absolum (2006, p.12) teaching is built on the underpinning epistemology of building and managing relationships that are conducive to learning in a social environment where learners are allowed and supported to be “ originators” of their own learning. In this environment learning and understanding is socially situated and take place while learners ask, challenge, try out and test their own ideas, consistently showing initiative and creativity. Such learning has its foundational underpinnings in the work done by Vygotsky and Dewey (Bredo, 1997), which clarify the link between AFL and the progression towards independent learning by students. Although Vygotsky and Dewey differed in important points in their understanding and articulation of learning, they shared the important view of the socially constructed nature of learning and the desire to promote learner autonomy (Glassman, 2001).

### **2.3. Benefits of using Assessment for learning**

Throughout literature, researchers have explored how AFL has enhanced learning in students. There are a large number of benefits but for the scope of this study, only four were chosen because they are the ones that directly impact on the learning of learners with CLDD. These four are learner autonomy, engagement and involvement, feedback and reflection.

### **2.3.1. Learner autonomy**

The whole purpose of implementing and engaging in AFL is to encourage and enhance learner autonomy (Absolum, 2006; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2004; James, 2006; James & Pedder, 2006; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Wiliam, 2011). Marshall and Drummond in their investigation of the connection between AFL and learner autonomy, started off with the hypothesis that AFL has its foundation in an underlying pedagogic principle that highlights the promotion of the independence of students during their learning process. They, therefore, explored ways in which teachers' instantiate this principle in practice. They discovered that there are two groups of teachers who claim to use AFL in their classroom practices. The first group was the one who observed the "spirit" of AFL (those who adhered to the principle of the practice by not just allowing simple application and rigid technique, but adjusted it to inform and guide their practice) and those who observed the "letter" (these are the ones who followed the simple application and rigid techniques without embracing the underlying spirit that embody AFL), (Marshall & Drummond, 2006, p.137). They concluded that those teachers who embraced the "spirit" went out of their way to organise their classrooms based on tasks that were going to encourage autonomy and higher order thinking.

Absolum (2006), through the work he is doing with Evaluation Associates in New Zealand, has come up with a generic pattern of classroom practices that can be readily implemented by teachers in order to promote learner independence. These practices enhance the partnership in learning where the teacher gradually releases power and ownership of the learning process to the learner until autonomy is gained. The main tenets of these practices include making learning explicit (by sharing learning intention, relevance of the learning, success criteria and modelling to show learners what the learning looks like), effective feedback ( which undergirds the teaching/ learning process), self-, peer and teacher- assessments ( which will determine where learners are at in order to determine the next step and promote further learning) and lastly active reflection by both learners and teachers as a way of monitoring their progress and achievements so that they can make informed decisions about adjusting learning and teaching. These AFL principles are supported by most AFL proponents although they might vary in the terminology used.

James and Pedder (2006) provide evidence that through such explicit and interactive processes as mentioned above, teachers are able to help learners to "develop their own

and one another's increasing independence in diverse learning situations" (p.111). However, in Marshall and Drummond's (2006) investigation, it was concluded that most teachers found it very difficult to transform these AFL procedures and practices into classroom cultures that promote student autonomy. Although in the educational realm, the role of teachers in the classroom are gradually shifting from being transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning, the underlying epistemological assumption that most teachers still hold about what makes good teaching and learning need to change (Black & Wiliam ,2001; Black, McCormick, James and Pedder. 2006). If teachers are to embrace the spirit of AFL and implement it effectively to improve student learning, they need to seriously rethink their core-aim, which is assisting students to learn and become life-long learners in this dynamic information–overloaded world. The shift in thinking needs to be aligned to questions such as:

- What are students going to learn? as opposed to “What am I going to teach?”
- How are they going to learn? Instead of “How am I going to teach?”

Implementation of AFL therefore needs high organisation based on effective well-constructed ideas which are based on research, if it is going to produce lifelong, autonomous learners (James & Pedder, 2006; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; The New Zealand Curriculum; 2007). Coffey, (2005) sums it all up with a challenge that says:

“Practice is ripe for modification when teachers begin to understand the nature of the gap between their own current actions and the picture they have of themselves as professionals. In the process of becoming the person or professional they want to be, contradictions between beliefs and actions may be constructed, existing beliefs deepened and oftentimes risks are taken as new actions or behaviours are tried in the classroom”(p.170).

This challenge describes teachers who embrace the spirit of AFL, and therefore have a close partnership with their students. In such situations, nothing is beyond their control as they refine their practices in an effort to support their students to become independent learners. These teachers have an inherent belief that all performance and knowledge can be developed and improved. This therefore brings synergy between the concept of the formative process in learning and the way they approach their own classroom practices (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). For learner autonomy to be achieved, student involvement needs to be at the core.

### **2.3.2. Learner involvement**

Black, et al. (2006) clearly articulate that learner involvement becomes ripe when a “social and community discourse” is established in the classroom which allows for collaboration by teachers and students in AFL processes and methods critically focusing on classroom interactions and learning inquiry. Absolum (2006) describe these relationships as “learning- focused relationships” (p.28). Student involvement needs to be consciously planned for and woven into the fabric of classroom practices. Involving students does not happen automatically so teachers need to invest time into shifting their practices in order to create room for learners to become part of the teaching /learning process.

Furthermore, students’ participation and involvement can be broadened by teachers really thinking about the questions they ask and the tasks they set which will in turn allow students to explore their answers by brainstorming with peers before communicating their contributions. These encourage student-led learning conversations where students are free to explain their own understandings in their own ways. This type of learning style allows learners to reveal their prior knowledge, gaps and misconceptions which the teacher, together with other students, can address immediately to enhance learning. However, some teachers have a tendency to engage in questions and answer rituals where they ask closed questions which demand instant, predetermined answers (Black, et al. 2004). These types of questions are often answered quickly by more vocal learners thereby cutting out the rest. Sometimes these teachers tend to answer their own questions if the answer is not forthcoming from the class (Black, et al. 2006; Black & Wiliam, 2001; Marshall & Drummond, 2006). These unconscious responses by teachers tend to inhibit involvement and motivation to think and may lead students into a dependency syndrome where they wait for others to participate and respond to questions while they take the back bench (Black & Wiliam, 2001). Likewise, it has been suggested by these authors that teachers should desist from answering their own questions, but rather give learners enough processing time. By allowing processing time, teachers would be signalling their expectation that they require the students to think and respond.

A culture of questioning and encouraging deep thinking should be adopted by every teacher who is committed to using AFL practices and processes (Black et al. 2004). Learning conversations should be thoughtful, reflective and focussed to explore students’ understanding (Black et al. 2006). Students need to be given opportunities to

communicate their understanding, thereby constructing their own knowledge. Through the investment of time, resources and effort in setting up effective learning designs and accommodations, students can take active responsibility and involvement in their learning (Black et al., 2006, James & Pedder, 2006, Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Such learning designs include collaborative learning which elicits peer feedback and scaffolding. When the teacher has created a good climate to encourage this, students themselves can ask questions of each other and focus can move from the teacher to the learners themselves. They will become originators and creators of their own learning leading to autonomy.

Black & Wiliam (1998b; 2001) through their work in the King's Medway Oxford Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP) revealed that students who encounter some form of difficulties during their learning journey, resulting in poor results, lose their self-esteem and believe that they lack the ability to learn. This group of learners include learners with special learning needs and so teachers need to invest time into planning strategies and practices that help raise their self-esteem and belief that they are capable learners. One way that could be helpful in achieving that, not only in this group, but in all learners is by involving them in the feedback process.

### **2.3.3. Feedback**

Interaction and feedback are at the heart of any innovation in AFL and pedagogy (Hattie & Tipperly, 2007; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Ramaprasad, (1983) defined feedback as information about the gap that exists between current and the desired performance. It raises students' awareness of their strengths, areas to be improved and identifies actions to be taken in order for improvement on overall performance to take place in the intended learning. Wiliam (2011) corroborates with Ramaprasad (1983) by noting that constructive feedback delivers high quality information about how learners are progressing with their learning. This can include how they have performed in a learning task, what they did well, what needs to be improved and how and where they need to go next. The nature of teacher and student interaction and the way feedback is given can enhance or hamper thinking and further learning. Wiliam asserts that information on the gap can only become feedback when it has been acted upon by the teacher and learner in order to close the gap.

For instance, feedback has to be used formatively to adjust teaching and learning. More importantly, learners should be the ultimate users of feedback as they reflect on their learning processes and work out how to improve so that they can achieve the desired

performance or goal. Black & Wiliam (2001) substantiate that feedback has been shown to improve student learning where the priority of giving feedback is to challenge students to tease out their assumptions and help them to be critical and deep thinkers about the quality of their arguments and contributions during learning. In other words, feedback has to be domain specific and used for a particular purpose to improve or affect students' future learning. It cannot be separated from the instructional system within which it is provided, otherwise it becomes confusing or useless to the learner.

According to Clarke (2003) classroom feedback to learners can effectively boost self-esteem, motivate and actively promote learning in learners, even those who have learning difficulties and those who are struggling with their learning. Wiliam (2011) also implores teachers to give feedback that helps students to move forward in their learning. As learners consistently get constructive feedback which boosts their self-esteem and efficacy, they will be confident enough to seek feedback from the teacher and from their peers in order to reflect on different ways to improve their learning. Furthermore, they will begin to engage in the metacognitive process of constructing knowledge for themselves as peers and teachers support and scaffold them through the feedback loop. No matter what artistry we may employ as teachers, learning is still something that learners have to do themselves.

#### **2.3.4. Reflection**

Metacognition is an important framework for understanding, thinking and learning, of which the highest form of thinking is considered to be “reflective thinking and the strategic management of thinking” (Black et al., 2006, p.124). Even though teachers give feedback and scaffolding to learners, it is the learners themselves who need to be afforded opportunities and time to think strategically and reflect on their own learning. Teacher modelling of the reflective process helps students to be “metacognitively wise” (Black et al, 2006, p.125). Learning will therefore be more productive when it is more reflective, intentional and collaborative. However, these practices do not come naturally to students, they have to be taught.

As learners engage in the AFL process, all the tenets discussed above come into play. Learners become involved when AFL practices are clearly articulated so that students become clear on what is to be learnt, why and how success will be measured (Absolum, 2005). Therefore, when these practices are underpinned by constructive feedback and scaffolding, students will understand their goals and learning pathways better (Clark, 2003; William, 2011). They will also understand their role in learning and in managing

their learning more independently because they know what to do and how to get there. AFL helps cultivate these skills by involving the learners in determining these components of learning as well as receiving and giving feedback while assessing themselves and their peers. Learning is, therefore, no longer something they receive, but becomes something they pursue and have a hand in shaping.

In AFL there is high emphasis on transferrable skills which will lead students to become lifelong learners. AFL practices are transferrable to any aspect of life within the formal schooling years of a learner and beyond. It also makes assessment become a more transparent process because it is based on critical information which is shared with or has been generated by the learners themselves. Hence, learners are able to take responsibility for their own learning and eventually for their assessment too. Hence Assessment for learning fits neatly into classroom practices and does not involve something extra, apart from thorough planning.

Nevertheless, AFL requires the application of specific elements to produce the desired results of learner involvement, reflective practices and autonomy. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, these elements were clearly articulated by Absolum (2006) in his book "*Clarity in the Classroom.*" These are:

- Sharing learning intentions, relevance and success criteria with the students. This is intended to bring clarity about what is to be learnt. It helps students as well as teachers to understand what they are trying to learn, why and how. In this process, the success criteria can be shared by the teachers or it could be co-constructed by both parties. Co-construction of the criteria is more effective because it involves the learners and they will be able to articulate it in their own words. Unless both are clear about the intended learning, the learning process will collapse.
- The teaching process- This is where the teacher and the students have the opportunity to model and/or examine exemplars in order to gain a clearer understanding of what the expected outcomes look like, and how it is done. In this part of the process, students are exposed to a range of opportunities to trial the criteria through learner tasks where they practice and explore learning both independently and collaboratively in small groups. During this process students will be scaffold in their learning through teacher and peer questioning and feedback. The teaching process is followed by assessment.

- Self-/peer- and teacher-assessment: If this process is conducted properly it will help discard all the myths and idiosyncrasies which learners hold about assessment. Meaningful and authentic learning is impossible without ongoing assessment in order to collect information which can be used to inform the teaching and learning process. The information that is gathered will enable both teachers and learners to recognise their own and others' success and to focus on how they are learning as well as where they are with their learning.
- Active reflection- Although reflective processes are utilised throughout the whole process, this last reflection session enables the teacher and the students to look back at what they learnt in order to deepen their understanding of the learning that has just happened and to put their learning experiences into context. This process helps them to then focus on figuring out the next steps in order to promote further learning.

#### **2.4. Who are these learners and how do they learn?**

Since this investigation is exploring special educators' perceptions on the effectiveness of learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities, it is ideal to explore who these learners are.

There is growing increase of learners with complex learning needs permeating our schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ministry of Education, 2010). According to Carpenter (2010) these students do not have learning profiles that fit into the current learning environments, curriculum models or teaching/learning approaches. Morton & McMennamin (2010) concur with this by asserting that most teachers in regular schools are struggling to see the relevance of the curriculum for these students because of their atypical learning profiles (Carpenter et al., 2011). Therefore students with CLDD are challenging even the most skilled teachers because of the complexity of their needs. Who are these learners?

Porter & Ashdown (2002) described complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) as a wide and varied group of learners .... , who do not simply require differentiated curriculum or teaching at a slower pace, but who require adaptations and modifications to teaching strategies. Others refer to them as having two or more disabling conditions that co-exist (Visser, 2009), that overlap (Dittrich and Tutt, 2008) and co-occur (Rose, Howley, Ferguson & Jament, 2008). For example, they include

learners with co-existing conditions such as autism together with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or profound and multiple learning disorders, or a student with Downs' Syndrome which co-occurs with visual impairments and/or mental health issues. Some of them have disabilities arising from pre-mature births, parental substance and alcohol abuse and those with rare chromosomal disorders (Carpenter, Cockbill, Wiggett & Eggerton, 2012).

More specifically, having these conditions which co-exist with one or more special learning needs that overlap and interlock (Carpenter, 2010), creates complex learning profiles which challenge educators to know which pedagogies to prioritise. For instance, if a student has autism and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), teachers are faced with a dilemma about which one to target first or which pedagogy to use. The co-occurring and compounding nature of these learning difficulties show inconsistent achievements in different learning areas presenting atypical learning profiles. For example, a student with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which is co-occurring with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) may decode very well in reading but show very low attainment in mathematics because of the Foetal alcohol syndrome disorders (Blackburn, 2011). Goswami (2004) reveals that the brain's parietal lobe which controls numeracy and mathematical computation in students with Foetal alcohol syndrome disorder is damaged. For most of these students, because they have a range of issues and combination of layered needs such as mental health, social, behavioural, communication and cognitive, they need informed specific support, strategies and pedagogies to enable them to access and engage effectively in the learning process and to actively participate in the classroom and wider community activities (Carpenter, 2010).

Therefore, because of this co-existence and overlapping nature of the disabilities and needs in students with CLDD, it is becoming more and more complex for teachers to decide which approach to use. Despite the fact that there is powerful research based literature and clear, educational guidance on individual disabilities, it becomes difficult which pedagogy takes precedence when the disabilities and needs are multi-layered. Teachers and educators seem not to have the repertoire in their toolkit to meet the teaching/learning needs of these students. Carpenter (2010) argues that without transformative education, these learners will be disenfranchised and ill-equipped to become autonomous, life-long learners and, active participants and citizens in this 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

The research which was carried out by Morton and McMenamin (2010) on the collaboration of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment revealed that despite the declaration of inclusion by the Ministry of Education (2001) in the disability strategy, teachers are struggling to see the relevance of the curriculum to students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities because their practice is based on the deficit view of disability. Despite this, Morton and McMenamin (Ministry of Education, 2011) stated that students with complex learning needs are capable learners of the curriculum provided adequate adaptations and modifications are implemented and other researchers concur with them (Wehmeyer, 2006; Carpenter et al, 2012, The European Agency for Special Education, n.d.). Carpenter, Egerton, Brooks, Cockbill, Fotherington, & Rawson (2011) hypothesized that in order to meaningfully, effectively and purposefully include students with CLDD in learning, teachers and educators need to evolve new generation pedagogies whose core is assessment.

Carpenter (2010a) suggests that to engage these students in the learning process, teachers and educators need to evolve “new generation pedagogy” (p.5). He conveys that this pedagogy needs to be integrated into a framework of practice that currently exists in the schools. Children and young people with CLDD are a distinctive group of students who require personalised learning programmes that target their unique learning profiles. Hopkins (2004) concurs with him when he articulates that:

“The most powerful lever we can pull at the moment to achieve personalised learning is assessment for learning....., it is a powerful means of helping teachers tailor their teaching to pupils’ needs to get the best improvement and to involve, motivate and help them take the next steps in learning” (p.10).

Fullan, Hill & Crevola (2006) strengthen Hopkins’s assertions when they discuss the importance of personalised learning as an approach which puts the learner at the centre. To be more specific, it provides them with learning that is tailored to meet their needs at any given time. This assertion is in agreement with the spirit of AFL (Marshall & Drummond, 2006) which puts the student at the centre and involves them in originating and tailoring their own learning through the co-construction of learning intentions and outcomes, as well as the success criteria (Absolum, 2006). They also monitor and reflect and adjust their learning strategies by being involved in the feedback loop. For students with CLDD this is done through putting in place the relevant accommodations and adaptations.

In their exploratory study on the effects of personalised learning on engagement of learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities, Carpenter et al. (2011) revealed that these students require curriculum calibration, pedagogical reconciliation and a creation of new and innovative teaching strategies. They assert that without implementing these three, learners with CLDD are at risk of being disenfranchised and isolated from the curriculum and education. Although, these are relevant for engagement, the question still remains, “could there be other holistic ways of including learners with CLDD in their learning?” Could these three elements be integrated with AFL principles in order to enhance learning and engagement?

#### **2.4.1. Curriculum calibration**

Firstly, Carpenter et al (2011) suggest that there needs to be some form of curriculum calibration, meaning a profiling of individual students’ needs in order to match with their learning patterns and styles with curriculum outcomes. If the curriculum is not adapted and calibrated to suit the profile of needs of students with CLDD, it will often result in a fragmented curriculum which lacks “cohesion, congruence and continuity” and this further disenfranchises these students. The curriculum outcomes need to be focused, purposeful and relevant through carefully matching what is to be taught and how it is to be taught to the profiled needs of the student. This will allow the students to be truly engaged in a dynamic and coherent learning process that makes sense to them.

In curriculum calibration, personalised learning experiences are explored, shared and negotiated with the students and their families in order to match their needs. Fullan, Hill and Crevola (2006) delve deeper when they assert that motivation to learn and pedagogical experiences that hit the unique mark for a particular student’s need engages them with their learning. He further states that learners [with CLDD] do not become engaged unless learning experiences match or inspire their inherent needs and interests? This is where AFL principles make a difference when the student is involved in identifying his/her learning needs as well as negotiating the learning intentions and co-constructing success criteria. This AFL process will make the learning process explicit and meaningful to the student. Even though this process might seem unattainable, it requires a significant shift in thinking and an adoption of a more inquiry-based style of teaching/learning approach, rather than a curriculum and standard based one (The New Zealand Curriculum ,2007). This approach also adheres to the rights of child where they need to be listened to and their voice to be heard and acted upon (United Nations, 1989).

### **2.4.2. Pedagogical reconciliation**

Pedagogical reconciliation is the adaptation and adjusting of teaching approaches in order to match them with the unique learning profiles of the learners. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, AFL is not an add-on but it should be able to fit into any classroom programme and practice. With that in mind, teachers of learners with CLDD are required to invest time in “pedagogic re-engineering by adapting and adjusting their practices and existing repertoires so that their students’ unique learning profiles are catered for (Carpenter et al., 2012, p.4). According to Lewis & Norwich (2005) teachers need to carefully analyse the structure and components of other successful pedagogies for individual disabilities and then match them to their students learning profiles , so that they can make informed professional judgements on which needs to prioritise. This process is underpinned by personalised inquiry through which teachers develop effective teaching/learning approaches and experiences using research literature together with evidence-based knowledge of the students’ successful learning pathways and styles. This allows them to set high expectations which can be achieved gradually through the use of AFL practices until full participation and autonomy is achieved. Pedagogical reconciliation allows teachers to then be able to create new and innovative teaching strategies.

### **2.4.3. Creation of new innovative teaching/learning strategies**

These new and innovative strategies involve adapting, adjusting and making meaningful accommodations in order to match the unique learning profiles of students with CLDD. Accommodations are either instructional or assessment adaptations which allow a student to demonstrate what he/she understands, knows or has learnt without fundamentally changing the content being taught or target being assessed. They do not reduce learning performance expectations but they change the manner or setting in which information is presented or the manner in which students respond (Shute, Hansen & Almond, 2007). Examples of accommodations that can be made include increasing the time given to complete a task or learn a concept, or depending on the nature of disability (for example, for those who have autistic spectrum disorders as a co-existing condition) may have a setting accommodation where they are allowed to work in a space with less distractions. In an assessment or learning task, depending on the nature of their co-existing or co-occurring difficulties, a student may be given special considerations where he/she could take the assessment either than by writing or presenting their learning orally or through a scribe. They could also be given the

opportunities to use alternative means of communications such as sign language, visual cues or use electronic devices to give their responses. They could also be given accommodated presentation of the materials, meaning the materials could be presented to/ by the student using assistive technologies to help them access the learning and also a range of communication styles, such as sign language, visual cues and schedules and picture prompts that can be used to aide communication and understanding. (Shute, Hansen & Almond, 2007)

More importantly, in this process, it means that when educators of students with CLDD have effectively completed pedagogical reconciliation and provided meaningful adaptations and accommodations students' involvement, reflection and learner autonomy could be accelerated. If AFL principles are thoughtfully and consistently woven through the learning while supported by meaningful accommodations, the acquisition of these skills can be heightened. Wolke (2009) corroborated the ideas of Carpenter et al. (2011) by articulating the needs for these interventions in the learning of students with CLDD. These interventions will give students a voice, allow them to be included, listened to (United Nations, 1989; MacArthur, 2009) and given autonomy throughout the AFL process (James & Pedder, 2006; Marshall & Drummond, 2006). They are also given the opportunity to be originators of their own learning as they use these accommodations to explore, negotiate, communicate and present their thoughts and understandings ( Absolum, 2006; Black et al, 2006).

The creation of these new and innovative strategies will enable educators to generalise these adaptations and accommodations together with AFL processes to all learning areas, co-curricular activities and home life, thereby allowing students to become active participants of their communities and society (Carpenter, et al., 2011, Watkins & D'Alessio, 2006). Carpenter, et al. (2012) asserts that students with CLDD need to follow unique learning pathways, which take teachers beyond differentiation into personalising learning. Therefore, as Hopkins (2004) has already stated earlier that AFL is the most powerful way to achieve personalised learning. Educators of learners with CLDD need to respond with practitioner-led inquiry approaches in order to investigate and reveal the effectiveness of lack of it, since there is not much research in this area.

Fullan, Hill and Crevola (2006) believes that a lot of progress has been made in the field of personalising learning through AFL. However, Fullan ( 2012) maintains that the work done is not being utilised in classroom practice (especially with students with CLDD where personalised learning is crucial), so he challenges educators to “get

assessment for learning out of the basement, clean it up, and creatively combine it with personalisation and continuous professional learning” (p.22) in order to bring about improvement in the teaching/ learning practices in classrooms. This is therefore challenging educators especially those with this new breed of learners to take up AFL practices again, weave it into the personalised learning programmes for their students and engage in a teacher-led inquiry cycle to see how to cater for the unique learning needs of their students.

### **2.5. Research on AFL and learners with complex learning needs**

With the growing push into inclusive education, learners with complex learning needs are challenging professionals because the co-existence of conditions make them present with learning profiles that do not fit into current learning environments, curriculum models and pedagogies (Department for Education, 2011; Morton and McMenamin, 2010). Learning for all learners involves the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Carpenter et al (2012) dealt with pedagogies that could be used, Morton and McMenamin (2010) discussed the New Zealand policies and curriculum needs to be implemented in order to meet the needs of learners with CLDD. In addition, Morton and McMennamin also investigated a form of assessment which is narrative assessment. Although narrative assessment is good, it does not give voice to the learner because their actions and learning is narrated by another person. It does little to enhance engagement, active participation in decision making and autonomy, which are the very things that are always taken away from these learners. Could assessment for learning be that missing link between?

However, issues around assessment for learning and learners with complex educational needs are only marginally dealt with. After searching through electronic databases and journals, only three relevant studies were found and these are discussed below.

#### **2.5.1. Classroom assessments for students with learning difficulties/disabilities**

Porter, Robertson & Mayhole (2000) conducted a research project which broadly explored assessment and learners with learning difficulties. Their investigations reflected on the need to further develop teachers’ skills on the use of AFL with all learners including those with special learning needs. They were mainly concerned with increasing student involvement in the setting of goals and evaluating their own performance.

They conducted a multiple case study involving conducting a literature review in which they identified key principles for good practice in AFL with learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. , These key principles included;

- Enhancing communication skills
- Encouraging the development of personal and social skills
- Supporting the processes of decision-making and problem solving
- Providing opportunities for students to develop greater autonomy and independence
- Generalising what was learnt in classroom-based learning into a range of contexts (p.1).

They then used these principles to form a log sheet to collect illustrative data through observation, analysis of teacher documentation and reflective sessions with participating teachers and students on their current practices. To complete this research, they made visits to seven participating schools and four colleges of further education, where they observed students with moderate to severe and profound learning disabilities.

Their research revealed that student involvement in assessment and learning was an unquestionable right and it echoes the United Nations declaration made at their convention on the rights of people with disabilities (United Nations (UN), 2006) They therefore, asserted that schools with largely prescribed curriculums needed to work harder to harness subject based and other learning activities in ways that promoted learner involvement in decisions about their own learning. When they analysed the case study materials against the literature review findings, they concluded that there were four aspects that shaped effective practice of AFL with learners with learning needs. These four aspects will be discussed below.

#### **2.5.1.1. Ethos of educational organisation**

Firstly, the authors referred to above established that practices needed to be underpinned by the importance of respectful learning focussed relationships which valued students' wishes. They conveyed that this aspect raises self-esteem and develops resilience and self-determination for these students in their learning. This positive ethos results in learners feeling that they are appreciated and respected for who they are and therefore show willingness to be involved in the learning process and to contribute to assessment. This results in the likelihood that learners would be engaged in their personalised learning programmes that meet their unique learning needs. In their vignettes of good

practice, these authors also found out that institutional policies and practices help to ensure continuity and progression which is supported by regular professional learning on aspects of assessment, teaching and learning.

#### **2.5.1.2. Student involvement capabilities**

Secondly, the same authors discovered that there was a continuum of student involvement in the learning process, starting with simple skills and moving on to more complex skills along the way. In earlier stages students began by actions and behaviours of showing anticipation for activities, to choice-making and expressing preferences. These are initial stages of developing decision making skills. With encouragement and formative feedback, they also realised that students gained skills which enabled them to reflect on their choices, decisions and achievements. Students also needed support to move on from monitoring and recording their achievements to more complex skills of being evaluative about their performance and achievements. Self-evaluation/assessment includes the development of skills that enable them to examine how they learnt and the strategies they used and compare them with previous achievements. With learners who have special learning needs, this can be made possible by supporting this process with the use of easily understood and accessible tools. The development of self-evaluative skills in these students is enhanced by being in collaborative and sharing group contexts where they work with and communicate with peers. Most importantly, it develops confidence and raises self-esteem and self-efficacy which is an integral part of the AFL process.

#### **2.5.1.3. Teacher strategies**

Thirdly, the case study observations illustrated that AFL calls for teacher styles that promote reflection, problem-solving and learner autonomy and independence. Some of the strategies that teachers used to promote these skills were to encourage shared attention, communication and dialogue among students. They also allowed sufficient wait time during the learning and feedback sessions for students to reflect and think deeply before they shared their responses. Their observations confirmed the importance of promoting dialogue through the use of careful questioning in order to prompt students to remember and to scaffold them to elaborate their responses in a reflective way. Teachers also actively modelled reflective behaviour which included the consideration of alternative ways of doing things.

#### **2.5.1.4. Resources and classroom organisation**

Lastly, Porter, Robertson and Mayhoe (2000) discovered that teacher planning and preparation was paramount to supporting student involvement. Self-assessment places heavy demands on memory, so the provision of concrete tools as well as visual images such as photographs, video or computer generated images were useful aids. The use of resources such as Rebus or Makaton symbols also acted as prompts to support students' communications and self-assessment. Careful selection of resources and student grouping is important for promoting and supporting interaction and sustained learning conversations among students, so the case study participants used it a lot. They also discovered that it was important to check students understanding of their learning targets and the importance of using this information in planning for further learning.

However, while the case study observations and the document review highlighted some good practice principles, there were issues raised that caused tensions and dilemmas for implementation. It was discovered that, for some reason, some students were still excluded and that there was need for teachers to be conversant with the continuum of student involvement skills. For example, for students with severe and complex learning needs, small skills such as focussing for two seconds, if supported and celebrated, will motivate the students to keep trying, resulting in them developing into more higher order skills. Educators therefore need to explore strategies of how to encourage, develop and support those simple skills, such as early decision making skills based on choice making, to development of monitoring right through to evaluation of performance on self-selected learning goals. Furthermore, teachers need to develop how to recognise the strategic nature of these behaviours and select them to use for regulating behaviour and learning.

Another dilemma that faced teachers was that because the curriculum was driven by an emphasis on outcomes, it directly influenced the focus on monitoring, rather than evaluation. Self-evaluation is an integral part of the AFL process; therefore it should take place within a context that supports student's self-esteem. In some case studies, AFL was an infrequent "bolt on" exercise rather than a regular and integral part of classroom practice. They therefore figured out that this could be supported by developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that address these cross curricular skills and which needed to be embedded within meaningful contexts. Schools therefore, needed to have school wide policies for supporting school wide practices right from the classroom, playground and all the way to going home on the bus. In summary, this

investigation's emphasis highlights the importance of the AFL principle of involving students in learning and assessment and their right to be heard and their voice to be acted upon (United Nations (UN), 2006).

### **2.5.2. An assessment for learning called Adaptive Content with Evidence-based Diagnosis (ACED): Designing for learning effectiveness and accessibility**

Shute, Hansen & Almond (2007) investigated the use of AFL with students with visual disabilities in the mathematical field of algebra and geometric sequences. Their main target was on how to give feedback with what they called "task-level feedback" and the use of adaptive sequencing of tasks. They describe task level feedback as feedback that provides specific and timely (real time) information to the student about a particular response to a problem or task and takes the learner's current understanding and ability level into consideration. Adaptive sequencing of tasks involves making adjustments to the sequence of tasks, in real time, after taking into consideration the learners proficiency level and their prior knowledge and then figuring out the most informative task to help support the student to progress to a higher proficiency level within the AFL environment. Therefore their research questions were:

- Is elaborated task-level feedback more effective for student learning than simple (verification only) feedback?
- Is adaptive sequencing of tasks more effective for learning than linear sequencing?
- Is the AFL system usable by individuals with visual disabilities?

These authors conducted a two phase study with the first phase focussing on learning effectiveness, which covered questions one and two. Phase two focussed on accessibility which answered question three. They had an experimental and a control group in their study. In the first phase they pre-tested both groups to establish their proficiency levels and then post-tested them after. The results of phase 1 showed that AFL helped students to learn, due to the effects of elaborated task-level feedback. However, adaptive sequencing of tasks did not show significant effects on learning. Both groups received adaptively sequenced tasks, but they differed in the types of feedback they received. There was a significant difference between the experimental and the control group in the post-test results. The experimental groups made more gains than the control.

Whereas, formerly learners with disabilities were excluded from taking national assessments, it is no longer so, because of the huge global drive on inclusion. Unfortunately, assessments are often designed without taking accessibility into account, that is, some assessment policy makers design assessments without considering whether all learners are able to access them. The results in phase 2 of the study which focussed on accessibility showed that when students engaged in assessments using relevant and adequate accommodations, they were able to complete the same assessments as their peers without disabilities. However, it took longer for them because they were using assistive technologies and other accommodations which they needed time to get used to. Nevertheless, it was revealed that making diverse accommodations such as pre-recorded and synthesized speech and audio-tactile graphics enabled the benefits of elaborated task-level feedback and adaptive task sequencing to be available to learners with visual disabilities, enabling them to be involved and so develop autonomy.

### **2.5.3. Assessment for learning and pupils with special educational needs**

Watkins and D'Alessio (2009) in their research on inclusive assessments across several European countries which are members of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education explored how AFL can be implemented with these learners. After they realised that most research of AFL was often done with students without disabilities, they decided to explore this concept within their own agency. They investigated the relevance of research-based AFL with learners with special educational needs along with the possible implications for teachers, learners, school managers, parents and their assessment practice.

This research was a multiple case study across countries in Europe. The participants were not only individual schools but in some cases they were school clusters, or resource centres (with no students) but who provided itinerant teachers to schools. The students that were represented in these case study sites ranged from those with severe and complex learning needs, behavioural difficulties (causes of these were not mentioned but may have resulted from foetal alcohol spectrum disorder or autism spectrum disorder), those with visual and motor disabilities (some with co-occurring disabilities). The sites used to gather this data were in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Their methodology in this research involved a literature review, a document review, case study visits and reflections on observations against the literature reviewed. The investigation was carried out in two phases with the first phase concentrating on

inclusive assessment and the second focussing on AFL. During the second phase the authors/researchers had intensive discussions with practitioners and participants from the different sites, to discuss the form that AFL with took in their sites with students with special learning needs. The two main areas that were investigated in the second phase were to find out:

- Whether AFL meant the same thing for students with and without special learning needs – in other words “Do the same principles apply?”
- Are there differences in the use of AFL for students with and without special learning needs? If so what are the differences for students, teachers, school managers and assessment practice? (p.185).

The findings showed that overwhelming agreement that AFL was a significant element in successful teaching and learning for all students including those with special learning needs. The practitioners concurred that it was not a question of whether AFL can be applied with this group of students, but rather how it could be applied. Furthermore, there was enough evidence to show that the same AFL principles apply in learners with and without learning needs. However, they noted several areas of concern in relation to applying these principles with learners with severe and complex learning needs.

The concerns that were highlighted, that were related to the engagement of these learners in the feedback loop, were regarding the communication of feedback to learners in a meaningful way so as to enable them to reflect and improve on their learning. Since the main purpose of AFL is to collect information to inform teaching and learning, the practitioners felt that this task was a bit challenging because of the nature of the students they were teaching. Nevertheless, they agreed that students with complex learning needs do not need different assessment systems, but they do need different methods (including communication ones) and tools of assessment as mentioned by Carpenter (2011) and discussed earlier in this chapter (pedagogical reconciliation and new innovative strategies). Tools need to be adjusted and modified to suit the cognitive level and social abilities of students. They also stated that these learners needed pedagogies that engage them in the teaching and learning processes which included problem solving and decision making, since they have these are often taken away from them in their day to day lives. They pointed out that learners need to be involved all the time if possible.

These authors also articulated that AFL as ongoing assessment provides opportunities for teachers to recognise and view the small improvements made by students on a continual basis to inform them for future teaching and learning. It was also highlighted the need for teachers to make concentrated effort with their observations, especially in cases where they are dealing with students who use non-or pre-verbal forms of communication. In these cases observation is the only way to establish students' responses which may be in the form of eye-contact, gestures or facial expressions. They also suggested the use of video as a helpful observation tool to capture what the teacher might have missed during the busyness of classroom activities. The use of videos enhanced clarity in meaning making, as well as reflection tools, although they do not allow for real time feedback.

Questioning and learning conversations are a big part of the feedback loop in AFL, but can be very challenging for learners with severe and complex learning needs. The practitioners discussed the importance of well framed questions which are presented to learners using appropriate accommodations and the importance of giving students enough wait time to process and give their responses. In relation to learning conversations, they highlighted that traditional dialogue may be difficult, so the appropriate communication methods or assistive technologies need to be used.

The bottom line for all these AFL principles is that they provide and encourage autonomy, involvement, reflection and use of feedback to improve learning. They also corroborated that the reinforcement of self-assessment is a crucial skill for these students whose learning targets may often include autonomy and independence. Teachers need to design self-assessments and reflection tools which will help students to access and present their own practices.

## **2.6. Summary of reviewed research studies**

When analysing these three studies, it has been clearly established that AFL seeks to develop learner involvement, reflective practices and autonomy through the medium of feedback. Although these studies differed in the range of disabilities they investigated, the underpinning AFL principles they focussed on were the same. They all agreed that AFL can be utilised effectively with students with a range of disabilities ranging from mild to severe and profound ones. Although the effectiveness of AFL has been proven, all the researchers are in agreement that there are tensions and dilemmas that are faced and need to be further investigated, especially with learners with complex co-existing

and co-occurring learning needs and difficulties. They have also identified the need for educators to shift their attitudes and beliefs on how they approach and implement AFL as part of their inherent classroom practice. There needs to a shift from tackling assessment for learning from the “letter perspective” to the “spirit perspective” (Marshall & Drummond, 2006, p.137).

As seen from the literature above, AFL has been proven by research to improve achievement in learners, however, there is very little research on its effectiveness in students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities whose learning needs co-exist and co-occur. As discussed earlier in this chapter, worldwide there is a real push for inclusive education and for the adoption of AFL as a form of ongoing assessment which helps learners to become autonomous lifelong learners. The question is therefore, where are these learners placed in the assessment continuum and can they fully benefit from AFL?

As Watkins and D’Alessio (2006) clearly articulated it is not a question of whether to apply AFL but how to do it. Having established its effectiveness in students with all kinds of disabilities which are stand-alone (not co-existing), through the studies discussed in this chapter, it is therefore paramount that educators of students with CLDD embrace the concept and be willing to take risks with their classroom practices. This needs a shift in their perspectives and beliefs on the learning of students with CLDD (Black et al., 2006, Carpenter et al, 2011, Marshall & Drummond, 2006).

This investigation therefore, is going to explore the perspectives of educators on the effectiveness of AFL on learners with CLDD through exploring the following questions:

- What do educators think about the effectiveness of AFL on students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities?
- Can these students access AFL principles and processes like every other learner? If not, what needs to be done?
- What are the different methods and tools that can be used to enhance AFL practices with learners with CLDD?

## Chapter 3: Methodology Chapter

The aim of this investigation is to gain an understanding of special educators perspectives on the effectiveness of assessment for learning in students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Firstly, the philosophical assumptions underpinning this study are going to be outlined and the paradigm and methodologies will be discussed. Secondly, the procedures used and how the analysis was conducted will be discussed. Lastly, the chapter concludes with the discussion of the limitations of the research design, ethical considerations and issues associated with plausibility.

### **3.1. Philosophical Assumptions**

This research design is informed by my ontological assumption that believes that multiple realities exist resulting from the beliefs that people create and co-create their own realities based on their own lived experiences within their social contexts, cultures and historical backgrounds (Creswell, 2013; Guba, 2008; Lichtman, 2010). This belief ascribes to reality as relative and therefore lends itself to the constructivist paradigm which is also in line with qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2010). During this research, I relied heavily on the participants' individual and co-constructed realities of their perceived effectiveness of assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. In order to understand these multiple realities, multiple sources of data was used which is in line with one of the characteristics of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2010). Reason (2003) poetically describes this assumption by stating that “our reality is a product of the dance between our individual and collective mind” (p.262). This means that people construct their realities as they move to and fro between their own individual experiences and those of their social circles. Initially individuals hold an assumption, but as they interact with others around them they alter and/or improve on these. Guba and Lincoln (2008) calls these “reconstructed understandings of the social world” (p246-247). Since education is dynamic and revolves around communities of learning, I believe that the realities of teachers and students are reconstructed over and over due to new enlightments that result from on-going learning.

This position is congruent with the socio-culturalist perspective that has informed educational theories as well as assessment for learning (Cowie, 2005b; Elmwood,

2008; Gipps, 2002; Murphy, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). These theories believe that human cognitive development and mental functioning are influenced by their historical backgrounds and contexts as well as their social interactions. The implications for AFL are that it has to be implemented in a social context in order for learners to be able to participate fully with understanding. Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (2001) have broadened this notion by grouping this research perspective together with social constructivism under a broader heading called the constructivist paradigm. According to von Glaserfeld (1996), these perspectives share an epistemology that emphasizes the primacy of understanding knowledge through “subjective experiences of people” (Creswell, 2013, p.20). This therefore, highlights the importance of conducting research in natural settings, that is, in the contexts where people live and work in order to know what they know. Lincoln and Guba (2000) reflect on an additional belief that knowing comes through collaborative action inquiry, which is the foundational block of assessment for learning. The main epistemological approach driving this research involves an attempt to understand the meanings and processes as perceived from different participants reflections on using assessment for learning. The constructivist paradigm tries to understand individual and shared social meanings (Crowe, 2011). This type of approach calls for interpretivism (understanding individually and socially-shared meanings).

### **3.2. Interpretive Research Paradigm**

Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) define the interpretive research paradigm on the basis of the philosophical assumptions underpinning it. They assert that people create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. Similarly, Klein and Myers (1999) define interpretive research on the assumption that knowledge is gained through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. Berger and Luckmann (1967) also claim that an interpretive paradigm is based on the view that people socially and symbolically construct their own institutional and organizational realities. This means ontological beliefs can be constructed on an individual or communal basis. Therefore, the underlying principle of the interpretive research paradigm lies in the fact that human beings construct the meanings of everything around them as they consciously and unconsciously interact with the

environment and other human beings. These meanings and realities can be individually formed as well as shared among groups of people as shared meanings.

Due to the philosophical beliefs outlined above, it was logical to engage in a qualitative interpretive methodological approach (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lichtman, 2010). The interpretive paradigm of research is more concerned with the discovery of how people construct meaning and develop an understanding of life rather than with the discovery of truth (Eisner, 2005; Meadon, 2011; Neuman, 2000). Interpretive qualitative studies, stress the study of individuals' view points and how these views shape their actions and influence the decisions they make. Hence interpretive researchers aim to discover how people experience their everyday lives and what they perceive as meaningful and relevant. In this research, the researcher is interested in understanding the way participants and special educators understand the phenomenon of using AFL with students who have very complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Furthermore, the interpretive researcher accepts that people perceive and construe the world in ways which are similar, but not necessarily the same, hence ontological assumptions can vary from one person to another.

This design, enabled the researcher to gain a holistic search for the participants' meanings, relationships, conceptions and understanding of social settings, structures and events over time (Janesick, 2003). It acknowledges the intimate relationships between the researcher and the participants and the situational constraints shaping the knowledge construction process. It aims to produce understanding of the social context of the phenomena and the process whereby the phenomena influences or is influenced by the social context. For this reason, interpretive research has potential to provide an authentic account of peoples' practical realities (Neuman, 2000). This research approach is consistent and compatible with the epistemological and ontological assumptions that the world and reality are interpreted by people in the context of historical and social contexts, that is, experiences of the world are subjective and best understood in terms of individuals' or groups' subjective meanings, rather than the researcher's objective definitions (Neilson & Brydon-Miller, 1997). Therefore, by choosing the assumption of subjectivity and interpretivist methods, this study claims that aspects of the phenomenon under investigation (educators perceptions on the effectiveness of assessment for learning in students with complex learning

difficulties and disabilities) are too complex to define and measure with standard instruments. In order to gain greater knowledge about it, the researcher opted for the method (interpretive) that is capable of capturing social meanings as generated by different educators and different cohorts. The interpretive framework that therefore underpins this research lends itself to constructivism (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lichtman, 2010).

### **3.3. Constructivism**

According to Creswell (2013) social constructivism is another worldview. In this view individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work. People there “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p.24), meanings directed towards certain objects, things and events. This results in the meanings being varied and multiple, so challenging the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow meanings which are categorised. In constructivism the researcher, relies as much as possible on participants’ views of the event or situation (Creswell, 2013; Lichtfield, 2010). These subjective meanings are usually negotiated socially and historically. Constructivism is both collaborative and interactive. Hence these meanings are formed through interaction with others and through cultural and historical norms to which people have been subjected.

In this investigation the researcher’s goal was to find out whether assessment for learning is as effective in students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities as it is perceived to be in learners without disabilities. Since the research site is practicing assessment for learning with learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities, it was important for the researcher to gain an understanding of how teachers co-constructed their understandings into this effectiveness and to dig deeper into their own perceptions. In order to achieve this the researcher had to use multiple data sources to track how these meanings were constructed by participants. For this reason, constructivist researchers often address the processes of interactions among individuals, be it through interviews, audio-visual images or document communications. They also endeavour to focus on natural contexts in which participants live and work in order capture these interactions.

In trying to do this, the constructivist researcher has to recognise that their own background shapes their interpretation of the findings. They have to position themselves (Creswell, 2013. p.25) in the research in order to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own experiences. Hence, researchers, make interpretations shaped by their own experiences and backgrounds. The goal of the researchers is to acknowledge their own backgrounds so that they can interpret the meanings of others about the world accurately. This is why qualitative research is often called ‘interpretive research.’”

### **3.4. Qualitative Research**

There are several factors that influenced my choice of methodology. According to van Heugten (2004) a “researcher’s inclinations and limitations influence the way they conceptualise and approach research problems” (p.204). Therefore, my inclination and skills mean that I prefer the qualitative methods and am interested in issues that are best investigated in natural contexts and that involve the researcher as the key instrument (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2010). I have an interest in people’s meaning-making activities and am keen to discover how practitioners viewed and felt about the effectiveness of AFL in students with CLDD. I would like to know how this impacts on their values, identities and decision-making in their classroom practice. Secondly, I would also like to find out what causal attributions the use of this method made to the life, journey and choices of these practitioners.

Lichtman (2010) defines qualitative research as “a way of knowing in which the researcher gathers, organises, and interprets information obtained from humans using his/her eyes and ears as filters. This writer delves further by asserting that it often involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in their natural and social contexts. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the researcher in the world. They assert that it consists of interpretive material practices that make the world visible by turning the world into a series of presentations which include field notes, interviews, audio visual materials, photographs, conversations and documentary evidence. Creswell (2013), on the other hand, articulates the definition of qualitative research by first mentioning its use of interpretive and theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems while addressing the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. They, assert

that to study these problems requires the use of qualitative approaches to inquiry which involve collection of data in natural contexts that are sensitive to the people and places under investigation. Creswell goes on to discuss how data analysis in qualitative research is inductive and deductive and how patterns and themes are established in the process.

Denzin and Lincoln's (2008) definition has a strong orientation towards the impact of qualitative research and its ability to transform the world while emphasizing traditional approaches such as interpretive, naturalistic approaches and meanings. Additionally, Creswell (2013) places emphasis on the process of research as flowing from philosophical assumptions to the interpretive lens and onto the procedures involved in studying human and social problems. However, the three definitions above agree in the sense that qualitative research is an interpretive process that seeks to understand meanings while situated in the natural context.

Silverman (2003, p.349) highlighted the significance of qualitative research to the wider community by stating:

- it studies what people are doing in their natural contexts
- it is flexible- meaning that it is fluid and ever changing and does not follow one way of doing things. Researchers pose new questions and find new ways of investigating them and they do not always know who the participants are and what to expect from them so they modify protocols as they progress through the study.
- It studies processes as well as outcomes.
- It studies meanings as well as causes.

These claims are congruent to the characteristics of qualitative research which were discussed by Creswell (2013) and Lichtman (2010) where they assert that in qualitative research understanding comes from an emic or insider's perspective. It means that one understands the views and perspectives of social, cultural and even educational phenomena by analysing the perspectives of those participating in it. In so doing, the researcher becomes the key instrument for gathering this data through examining documents, observing behaviour, and interviewing participants. In this investigation, behaviour was observed through viewing archived videos of assessment for learning practices which were taken by

participants themselves for professional development. Another characteristic they mention which is congruent to Silverman's claims is that the research is conducted in the field, or in natural contexts, with no attempt to control the variables or eliminate situational variables or programme developments. This is what makes qualitative research fluid giving the researcher the latitude to change things as they go. This means the design of qualitative research evolves throughout the research period and cannot be tightly prescribed in the initial stages. This issue will be referred to during the discussion of the procedures because there was a lot of tweaking of the original design to suit the situations.

Another characteristic of qualitative research is the reflexivity which it demands from the researcher. The researcher needs to position themselves in the research and convey their background such as work experience, cultural, social and historical orientations so that readers can understand how that influences our interpretation of the data (Wolcott, 2010). Furthermore qualitative research allows the researcher to give a holistic account by reporting on multiple perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Cresswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2010; Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative research was chosen for this investigation because it is deemed to be "well suited for the purposes of description, interpretation and explanation (Lee, Mitchell & Sablynsky, 1999, p.164). It gives deep insights into the perspectives of educators and education based contexts. It was also preferred because of the need for a complex detailed understanding of how educators perceived the effectiveness of assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities, since there is not much research in that area. This detail can only be gained and established through talking to people who are directly involved in the issue, allowing them to "tell their stories encumbered by what we have read or what we expect to find" (Creswell, 2013, p.48). Lastly, qualitative research was also preferred because it is believed to contribute valuable in-depth information in relation to implementation of research based educational practices (Eisner, 1998a).

Central to this study was gaining an understanding of educational practitioners' viewpoints, perceptions and practical realities of the use of and effectiveness of using assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Therefore, qualitative researchers share an understanding that reality is socially constructed and often there is an "intimate relationship between the

researcher and what is being studied and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.13). This was the case in my investigation where I decided to take role of insider researcher within my own work place. Although there were other reasons for conducting insider research such as access to and availability of sights with the relevant phenomenon, this was the key reason.

### **3.5. Insider Research**

Since this study was investigating issues that involved students with complex learning needs and disabilities, shared understanding of the nature of the students and how they learn brings a “certain trust that shapes the participants’ and the researcher’s thinking and actions, thereby positively shaping and influencing the quality of the data gathered” (Costley, 2010, p.1). As an insider, the researcher is in a unique position to study the issue in depth and with special knowledge of the phenomenon, which in this study is educators’ perspectives on the effectiveness of assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. It has already been established that there is very little research in this area.

Having consulted with nine other special needs schools in Auckland, only two other special schools are practising assessment for learning. The demographics of one of the two did not meet the definition of CLDD (complex learning difficulties and disabilities), because three quarters of their population are diagnosed with autism. The remaining school was not prepared to support me at that moment, but at a later stage during the year. This, however, was problematic because the delay meant that I was not going to finish my thesis in time. So for the reasons mentioned earlier and above, I decided to do insider research.

Rooney (2007) referred to insider research as a “professional carrying out a study in their work setting” and/or “researchers belonging to, or accepted as member of after a period of time in a community in which they are studying (Morton, 2010, p.4). The working definition of this study is more aligned to the first part of that definition. The insider researcher has knowledge and experiences of a familiar setting in terms of their own organisational culture, values and social backgrounds. In this case, the researcher needs to be conversant with special education pedagogies and understand how students with CLDD learn. Their knowledge, understanding and experience in this area will help enhance and

enrich the way they reflect on the data collected (Aber, 2006; McKeachie, 2002). However, in insider research the relationships and personalities between the researcher and the researched, and the topic under examination may enhance or be detrimental to the validity and accuracy of the data collected and the study at large (Darra, 2008; Mercer, 2007; Rooney, 2007; Rose, 2009). Galea (2009) suggests the need to establish relationships with participants who will cooperate with the process. This research method requires the researcher to sensitively build upon prior knowledge more quickly than a total stranger.

Since the researcher involved colleagues who were at the same level with her and whom she had done the same two year professional development course with, it raised several ethical issues of which she was aware. The ethical dilemmas that were presented by insider research were detailed and addressed below.

### **3.6. Ethical issues and issues validity**

Qualitative research involves places and people, so the researcher has a mandate to protect their privacy. Where there is involvement of people, relationships develop and evolve, therefore ethics also evolves alongside the research as part of the process (Josselson, 2007). The researcher has to adopt an ethical attitude which allows him/her to be versatile and be able to make decisions in situ as issues arise.

Some of the ethical issues were those of validity, especially bias and subjectivity. The issue of validity in insider research is complicated by the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Mercer, 2007). Rooney (2007) acknowledged the complexities of insider research and raised questions about how researcher's biases could threaten validity and trustworthiness of the study. Other researchers like Galea (2009) were concerned about how the researcher's relationships with participants may have a negative impact on participants behaviour. Some of the validity issues included how the researcher's tacit knowledge may lead them to misinterpret data or make false assumptions.

The research design allowed this to be dealt with through triangulation of methods, data collection and analysis, subversive reading and openness about the difficulties that arise from familiarity and over- involvement and over-identification with participants (van Heugten, 2004). Brannick and Coghlan (2007) asserted that we are all insiders in the communities that we live and suggested that researchers should be able to articulate their own tacit knowledge that has become segmented

because of socialisation through the process of reflexive awareness (Aber, 2006), and to be able to reframe it as theoretical knowledge.

Over-familiarity and involvement was identified as something that could influence interviews, therefore an abstemious style of interviewing (Gregg, 1994) was adopted (that is, restraining from passing opinions and making self-disclosure). Mercer (2007) suggested that it is paramount for insider researchers not to publicise their own views about the research topic and not to contribute their own stories during the interviews. The researcher endeavoured to do this. The researcher strove to maintain the balance between detachment and over-involvement which required some emotional work (automatic emotional regulation) and the adoption of marginal positioning (Darra, 2009; McKeachie, 2002). The researcher also continuously engaged herself in self-examination through counter-transference (van Heugten, 2004), defined as the redirection of the interviewer's personal entanglement with an interviewee through analysing their emotions and experiences.

There are also questions about neutrality that arise in insider research. The researcher revealed her interests beforehand. While it seems contrary to the point made earlier about maintaining marginal positioning, Darra, (2008) asserts that it is difficult and disadvantageous to maintain a detached relationship because self-disclosure by the researcher has an enhancing effect in information exchange and results in an honest and meaningful sharing by the participant. The researcher endeavoured not to influence the participants and the outcome of the research by involving the participants in the verification of transcripts.

### **3.7. Confidentiality**

The researcher endeavoured to mask the identities of the participants and the research site by using pseudonyms and generic codes such as “special needs school in the Auckland,” and categorical descriptors such as “senior manager, teacher, teacher aide.” However, even with the use of the above masks, someone somewhere might be able to make an educated guess; therefore, more rigorous techniques such as avoiding the use of direct quotes, minimizing contextual details, avoiding identifying language, identifying sentiments and descriptions of mannerisms, have also been used to disguise identities. Without irreparably undermining and stripping the narratives of their social and contextual meanings, the researcher removed sensitive, offensive or inflammatory

information from the interview transcripts (Tolich, 2004). Although this might seem to be failure to do justice to the participants' narratives, through failing to situate their feelings and actions adequately, this is a balance the researcher was willing to take, through consulting with the participants, in order to amicably disguise or remove all identifying features.

At the onset of the research, the researcher agreed with the participants on the uses of the data collected (the audience or readers of the study results) and how it was going to be disseminated. This allowed them to give informed consent. In cases where identifying information could not be removed, consent was going to be sought in order to release the data. However, there was no reason for that because no such case arose.

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, the researcher endeavoured to use a private and quiet place so that outside parties could not easily know who was participating in the research. Although there was an option to do the interviews at a location away from the site, most of the participants preferred to have them on-site. A stand-alone room which had secure blinds was located and used in order to ensure confidentiality. Most of the participants were happy with the interview location. One participant was not so sure about how she felt about the room, but when the researcher suggested that they could reschedule the interview at a different location, she decided to go ahead with the interview at that location. Although, all care was taken to protect the identities of participants, the site and the field of special education is a small and closed occupational world such that it is very difficult to totally conceal the location and identities of participants fully (Costley, 2010).

Furthermore, the researcher ensured that all information that was potentially damaging if read by other insiders, and which was innocuous, was avoided. This was a decision which the researcher had to make because she was faced with the dilemma of whether to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants at the expense of the data collection or not (Tolich, 2004). To ensure that this happened, the researcher went through a rigorous process of masking the identity of the research location and participants by omitting or any person-specific language, sentiments, mannerisms and also by minimizing contextual details. The researcher also sent the transcripts to the participants so that they could collaborate in removing identifying information and also check its accuracy (Coffey, Sato & Thiebault, 2005). All information collected was being kept in a safe

place and no one is allowed to have access to it except the researcher, the participant, supervisor and the programme administrator.

Although, the researcher ensured that all relevant steps have been taken to preserve confidentiality of the participants and site, and to ensure that informed consent was given, it is practically impossible to guarantee full confidentiality and anonymity and this was relayed to the participants through the consent process. However, as a researcher, the ethical duty of care remains my moral and my legal imperative.

### **3.8. Conflict of Interest**

The research involved work place colleagues, and this raised several ethical issues about conflict of interest. As an insider, the researcher asked her supervisor to assist with participant recruitment to ensure that there was no bias emanating from personal relationships and that the process was ethically conducted. Loyalty to colleagues and over-familiarity with the organisation could give rise to bias and lack of subjectivity. Triangulation of data collection tools and methods (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2000) was used to subvert the above. The issue of over-familiarity, involvement and identity was dealt with using the methods mentioned earlier (issues of validity). Regular debriefing with her supervisor as a critical friend also helped the researcher to maintain rational detachment (van Heugten, 2004, Gregg, 1994).

The researcher also struggled with the role conflict of being a researcher, as well as an insider, giving rise to the question of neutrality. There was a danger that professional codes and protocols would not encourage the asking of seemingly awkward questions which would fray loyalty bonds, but through continuous reflexivity and practice of self-awareness, it was avoided (Morse, 2007). This practices also allowed the researcher to critically evaluate and question practices and values held in the organization without fear. The reflexive process allowed the researcher to challenge and confront her own attitudes and assumptions in order to understand the reasons and justifications for decisions made during the research. The process of self-awareness enabled the researcher to confront her biases and prejudices beforehand, to allow her to later understand participants' perspectives and points of view. Moore (2007) points out that it helps to analyse one's own thoughts and motives in order to confront them.

The research design allowed rigorous protocols to be put in place in order to manage conflicts of interest, coercive influences or power imbalances that could have

arisen ensuring mitigation of any adverse effects. These adverse effects could arise from a range of causes such as over-familiarity, possible impact decisions on participant's own work and practices, personal agendas and /or competing loyalties. They could have arisen from institutional causes such as pressure to protect the institution's reputation or promoting research at the expense of protecting participants. Since using assessment for learning was a school wide professional development project, strong views on it could have arisen, such that participants could have committed to a particular explanation which they thought the management would like to hear, resulting in bias. The precautions taken to limit the bias of insider research also served to minimise any conflict of interest that may have arisen. However, participants were free to express their views and perspectives.

### **3.9. Case Study**

Case study can be loosely defined as the study of an issue or phenomenon within its real life context or setting (Yin, 2009). Tellis (1997) described case studies as “multi-perspectival analyses” (p.2) due to the fact that researchers not only consider the perspectives of each participant, but also the relevant groups of participants and the interactions between them. Eisenhardt (1989, p.8 ) defined case study as “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings.” However, it may involve one or more cases. Stake (2005) argues that it is not a methodology, but a choice of what is to be studied. Stake asserts that the case needs to be in a bounded system where it is bounded by time and place. Other researchers regard it as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology or a comprehensive research strategy (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2013). Despite the confusion in its placement in the research realm, case study is widely used in social research and is prevalent throughout the field of education (Lee, Mitchell & Sablinsky, 1999)

Creswell (2013) conveys case study as a qualitative approach in which “the investigator explores real life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information ( for example, observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents and reports), and reports a case study description and case themes” (p.97). Schell (1992) corroborates by articulating that case study is an ideal approach when seeking a holistic, in depth investigation which is designed to bring out detailed view points and perspectives of participants using

multiple sources of data. Creswell and Schell's assertions concur with the intentions of this investigation, that is why they are going to be used as the working definitions for this study. The data gathering sources for this research project are congruent to those described by Creswell.

One of the defining characteristics of case study is the manner in which it delimits the unit of analysis; the case (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2010; Merriam, 2002b). This research started with the identification of a case which is a special education organisation located in the greater Auckland region and has been practicing assessment for learning with its learners who have complex learning difficulties and disabilities for the past two years. On a lesser level the case can be regarded as special educators who have embarked on a specific assessment strategy, over a period of time. This investigation was undertaken two years after commencement of the use of assessment for learning in the school to allow them to pass through the initial implementation stage, so that they can look at the journey and see whether it was worthwhile. This allowed the researcher to capture information and stories of throughout this time and to examine the data gathered from both prior experiences and current experiences in order to track whether there has been a shift in perspectives. This single case was chosen in order to carry out an in-depth study of the phenomenon- that is, the researcher wanted to look deeply into fewer participants rather than scratch the surface with many participants (Creswell, 2013). Apparently, in case study, the number of participants is not critical, but rather the nature of the study and the degree to which the complex in-depth phenomena (educator perspectives on the effectiveness of assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities) was explored.

Another defining feature of case study, especially single qualitative case study, is that it generates thick data, in that the researcher investigates deeper, rather than wider (Lichtman, 2010). Schell (1992) asserts that case studies provide narrative accounts of participants' experiences which provide thick lived-in data because the investigation is carried out in the natural context. For example, Jean Piaget did extensive, extraordinarily deep and detailed studies with his own children and it turned out that based on his case studies, the findings generalised well to other children (Suter, 2012). This type of case study research involves interviews informed by narrative research (Riessman, 2008). Yin (2009) substantiates this by

claiming that good case studies are often full of rich narrative detail that often offer insights about complex processes. They are often speculative and engage the reader, and present him/her with ideas within rich descriptions that stimulate them to look at problems or situations in new ways. In fact, Suter (2012) points out that,

“researchers who use case study designs often find that their research ‘generalises’ to the extent that others can use ideas embedded within their descriptions in some other, often personal contexts” (p.366).

As mentioned earlier in the literature review that there is not much research done in this area of assessment for learning and students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. This case study may, therefore, offer insights to other special needs educators on how to further explore assessment for learning of other forms of assessment in order to improve the quality of their teaching and the learning of the students they teach. Practitioners may be able to generalise some of the findings in this study in their own contexts.

Furthermore, case study is particularistic in the sense that it focuses on specific individuals, organisations, situations, programmes, events or phenomena (Mutch, 2005; Patton, 2000; Rowlands, 2005). This specificity makes it a suitable approach to investigate practical problems in their natural contexts, situations or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice (Merriam, 1998). Because it can illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomena and facilitate discovery of new meaning because of its rich, thick, holistic description, case study is therefore heuristic in nature (Crowe, Creswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery & Sheikh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Mutch (2005) gives a detailed account of the purposes and discusses how it can be exploratory, explanatory, descriptive or evaluative. This case study is mainly descriptive and exploratory but can also be evaluative in that it judges the case’s *worthwhileness* formatively (Scott, & Morrison, 2006). The heuristic nature of this study is embedded in the discovery process which involves informed judgements by the participants which are grounded in their own and the researchers experiences. The creative heuristic process which was involved took the researcher beyond data to deep insights of the phenomenon at hand.

Creswell (2013) asserts that a case study needs to have a clear intent which could be composed to illustrate a unique case, which needs to be described and

detailed. Stake (2005) delves deeper by providing a typology of these case studies, which are intrinsic, instrumental or collective in nature. Intrinsic studies aim to provide detailed understanding of the phenomenon and evolve from the researcher's innate interest in the subject. On the other hand, instrumental studies provide insight into the particular case or clarify a hypothesis. Collective studies however, are used when the researcher intends to investigate a phenomenon in order to generate theory. The case design of this study was interpretive (Merriam, 2009), reflecting both intrinsic and instrumental data gathering which will be informative to the clarification of the hypothesis (Stake, 2005). The hypothesis being clarified is that assessment for learning is effective and conducive to learning. Researchers believe so, but do educators who are tasked to practice it in the classroom agree?

### **3.10. The Site of study**

The site of this research was in the greater Auckland region in the North Island of New Zealand. It is a state school comprising of 140 students who have complex learning difficulties and disabilities. The site has classes in five different locations. It comprises of a base school where the students with multiple and severe needs are based, and four satellite classes located in two regular primary schools, one intermediate and one high school in order to enable integration and inclusion with peers of their own age groups. All students in this school have intellectual disabilities which co-exist with other disabilities such as physical, Down's Syndrome, autism and others and they range from ages five to twenty-one years old.. Students with less severe complex difficulties and difficulties are the ones based in the satellite classes. This means that classes both at base school and the satellite classes range from new entrants up to high school. I worked as a teacher across the school as a revolving teacher and later as a primary satellite teacher. For this reason, I am well acquainted with the ability and range of needs of the students across the school. For ethical reasons, I took an eight months leave of absence in order to conduct this research.

Since the intention of this research was to investigate perspectives of educators, this site was chosen on the grounds that it has adopted a trans disciplinary approach to education whereby learning programmes involve a number of specialised practitioners with special roles. These included senior management staff, classroom teachers, therapists and teacher aides. Furthermore, this site was chosen

because it was one of the two schools who were practicing assessment for learning with students with CLDD and was ready to support this research. Selection was additionally influenced by pragmatic factors such as access to the site, availability of participants, and the timeframe and resources available to the researcher. As an insider, the researcher had better access to the site and resources in the school, than she would have had if she was an outsider (Sternberg, , Manion & Morrison, 2000).

The choice of site was further influenced by the concept of non-probability sampling that is recommended as the basis for selection of the site in small scale field based qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). For qualitative case studies “ it is their relevance to the research topic rather than their representativeness which determines the way in which people and [site] to be studied are selected” (Flick, 2002, p.41). The study sought to understand the effectiveness of the use of assessment for learning in students with CLDD as it applied to a single case so it was not concerned with the notion of representatives when selecting the site. Approaches to non-probability sampling include purposive, sampling (Cohen et al., 2000; Neuman, 2000).

Purposive sampling is a strategy in which “ particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Gregory, 1997, p.70; Maxwell, 1996). Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) was considered the most appropriate approach for site selection due to the nature of the demographics of the students in the school, and the need to involve practitioners who had experience in using assessments for learning with students with CLDD. A number of purposive approaches are detailed in literature (see for example Merriam, 2001; Neuman, 2000; Pritchard, 2009; Wellington, 2000). This study used criterion purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013; Pritchard, 2009) where the following pre-determined characteristics were used to select a state school:

- The school must have been implementing assessment for learning for at least two years;
- The school must have three quarters or all students who have CLDD.

Information was obtained by the researcher through calling nine special schools in a city on the North Island of New Zealand. Two schools met the criteria. The other school was prepared to support the study at a later stage, but the researcher was pressed for time (eight months leave of absence from work), so it was immediately discounted. Given the timeframe, the site selected needed to be accessible to the researcher immediately.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) acknowledged that research can be intrusive, so the ethical principles of seeking for informed consent and minimisation of risk were specifically addressed during the initial phase of this study. In order to gain access to the site, negotiations had to be undertaken with the principal and the Board of Trustees (Barron-Cohen, 2004; Denscombe, 2003). In an initial face to face consultation meeting was held with the principal and later an information pack outlining the research was sent to the Board of Trustees (BoT). This information is outlined in appendix A.

### **3.11. The Case**

The case of relevance in this study was the phenomenon of the perceived effectiveness of assessment for learning in learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. The case followed a cohort of ten participants who have different roles in the school in order to capture different perspectives of the educators who work with these students. The decision to site the case in a cohort was made on the grounds that learning programmes for learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities usually involve a range of practitioners working together. These educators may include the classroom teacher, different therapists and /or the teacher aide. Senior management staff is also involved at some levels. Unfortunately, therapists were not included in this investigation because they were not yet trained in the use of assessment for learning. Data was therefore gathered from the other three cohorts which are senior managers, classroom teachers and teacher aides. This decision was made to enable the researcher to have access to varied perspectives. Multiple data sources such as interviews, audio-video materials and document review (Creswell, 2013, Lichtman, 2010) were utilised in order to accurately follow the participants' use of assessment for learning over the last two years, so that the researcher can ascertain whether there was a shift in their perspectives. This process helped the

researcher to come to an informed conclusion about their perspectives, since a comparison was made between how educators perceived students' learning and their own practice before and after the implementation of assessment for learning.

### **3.12. The participants**

#### **Recruitment**

As an insider, the researcher asked her supervisor to assist with participant recruitment to ensure that there was no bias emanating from personal relationships and that the process was ethically conducted. The principal of the school was asked via e-mail to arrange for meeting to recruit participants. Information packs containing an invitation letter, a participant information sheet and a consent form, were taken to the school by the researcher's supervisor who explained the nature of the research and answered all questions before dispatching them to the prospective participants. The participants were offered a further time to meet with the supervisor to have any further questions answered to enable them to make an informed consent (Smythe & Murray, 2000) However, this was not necessary because the participants were satisfied by the information they obtained in the first meeting. Participants were therefore given a one week timeframe to read the research information, make up their minds and to return the consent forms which indicated their consent and agreement to be involved in the research. No translations of information / interview questions was required because everyone was conversant with the English language. (See appendix B)

Because of different starting and finishing times, recruitment was carried out in two sessions because the time the teachers were available, the teacher aides had already finished work. With the assistance of the principal, a separate meeting for the teacher aides was arranged during one of their meetings which was held during their working time.

A box was left at the school where participants posted their signed consent forms. Participants had to sign two consent forms, one which consented to participate in the research and the other which consented to the use of their videos and documents (see appendix B). After the agreed one week the researcher collected the consent forms and her supervisor drew out the names from the hat where more than required consent forms were returned. The draw was done by the supervisor in batches according to their roles in the school.

In the selection of participants to be interviewed, consideration was given to the sample size; representativeness and parameters of the sample; access; and the sampling strategy to be used (Cohen, et al, 2000). Sample size in qualitative research is usually “non-random, purposeful and small” (Merriam, 2008, p.8) and the researcher had to take into consideration how well the participants will “provide a window” (Hargreaves, 2006,p.177) on the phenomenon under study. It was important that the researcher obtained a minimum sample size that accurately represented the population that was being targeted. A small sample allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon deeper rather than wider (Creswell, 2013). Therefore selection of practitioner participants involved identification of members representative of each occupation involved who were conversant in AFL principles and practices and were not shy to share ideas. The table 1 below shows a summary of information about the participants:

Table 1: Summary information about the participants

*Table 1: Summary information about the participants*

Occupation	Gender	Years of experience in special education.	Years at site	Years of doing AFL.
AFL CLDD	Using			
Senior Manager	Female	30 years	20+ years	unknown
Senior Manager	Female	12years	4 years	8 years
New Entrant Base sch. Tr.	Female	11 years	11 years	2 years

Primary synd. Tr.	Female	29 years	11 years	2 years
Multiple disabled Tr.1	Female	20 years	20 years	2 years
Multiple disabled Tr. 2	Female	10 years	7 years	2 years
Intermediate synd. Tr.	Female	5 years	2 years	2 years
Teacher Aide 1	Female	1 ½ years	1 ¼ years	1 ¼ year
Teacher Aide	Female	16 years	16 years	2 years
Senior Synd. Tr.	Female	20 years	20+ years	11 years

The practitioners recruited were a good representation sample from across the school. Two of the teachers were from the primary syndicate, that is, one from the base school and one from a satellite unit. The base school primary teacher is the new entrant teacher whose students once they are settled and assessed, they can either go to the satellite units or stay at base school depending on their disabilities, social skills and behaviour. One of the recruited teachers worked a whole year practicing AFL in a satellite intermediate class and another year in a base school intermediate room. She also practiced AFL in one of the special

schools which had qualified for this study. Therefore, having her willing to participate in this study was exciting because she can give a lot of insight and comparisons between the different contexts. Two of the participants are from the senior class. The interesting thing with these two is that they team-teach the same class, so it would be interesting to hear their perspectives. One was a senior satellite class and she was one of the lead teachers of AFL when it was first introduced to the school ten years ago. She is also part of the senior management team, so she has a dual role. Two of the participants are from the senior management team, the principal and the deputy principal. The last two are teacher aide who are an integral part of the staff.

### **3.13. Data Collection**

#### **3.13.1. Qualitative Data**

Snider (2010) assert that as much as numbers are impressive in quantitative research that they do not reveal as much as narratives do in qualitative research. Bourma (2000) explains that qualitative research takes a non-statistical and non-mathematical approach which is informed by narrative research. Narratives have character in that they reveal the participants' emotions and attitudes. Qualitative research also uses illustrations, examples and narrations to explain fundamental concepts. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) corroborates by adding that on the other hand qualitative data often contains "inherent richness and holism with strong potential for revealing complexity" (p.560), which yields thick rich descriptions that are placed in their natural contexts, therefore easier to understand. Furthermore, qualitative data is often centred on people's lived in experiences which allow researchers to study the phenomenon, strive to make sense of, and to interpret the meanings people to bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative data is therefore collected in natural settings using multiple data collection strategies.

There are a variety of data collection methods that are continually emerging in qualitative research. However, Creswell (2013) groups these methods into four broad categories, which are observations, interviews, documentation and audio-visual materials. Czarniaska (2004) points out that eliciting stories through interviews is an important way of collecting data in qualitative narrative case studies. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also suggest that useful data can be collected through collecting and reviewing a wide array of document sources such as journal, personal reflective and evaluative documents, teacher lesson plans, curriculum

guides, school policies and many others. Audio-visual materials are as good as observations in that they allow the researcher to observe the participants in action while taking note of a range of processes that go on such as, interaction, instinctive and impromptu decision making, thinking processes and mannerisms which may give insight and understanding to participant's experiences. This study therefore, engaged three of the above data collection methods, which are one-on-one semi-structured interviews, document review and the review of audio-visual materials.

### **3.13.2. Interviewing**

The primary source of data collection in this investigation was the one-on-one semi structured guided interviews (Lichtman, 2010). Several researchers view interviewing as a series of steps in a procedure used to collect qualitative data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). They describe these steps from the design stage right through to the reporting stage. However, these sequences and procedures are not fixed, therefore allowing the researcher to change the questions asked according to the line of narration being taken. Lichtman (2010) simplifies it by describing qualitative interviewing as a "group of methods that permit you to engage in a dialogue or conversation with the participant" (p.139). Although it is referred to as a conversation, it is orchestrated and directed by the researcher in order to reap maximum benefits out of it.

According to Creswell (2013) the interview questions should be open-ended, general and focussed on the phenomenon, in order to allow diversionary insights into the participant's world, while answering the research questions. This type of questioning provides a tool for collecting the perspectives of the participants while permitting more of their voice to be heard (Pollard, 1997). As mentioned earlier, all participants recruited met the criteria of being conversant in AFL practices in students with CLDD and were able to share ideas fluently. One hour interviews were therefore scheduled in a quiet room at times that were convenient to the participants. Although the researcher as an insider had a considerable amount of rapport with the participants, refreshments were provided before the interview and interviewees were engaged in general questions in order to relax them.

At the onset of the interview the researcher explained the interview process and asked for consent to audiotape the interview and also to take notes. The

participants were also told that the researcher was only going to ask guiding and prompting questions, so they were encouraged to narrate their experiences, views and perspectives in as much detail as possible. This approach of interviewing was informed by narrative research methods (Allen, 2006). The researcher therefore adopted an abstemious style of interviewing (Gregg, 1994) where she refrained from divulging her own perceptions and opinions. Creswell (2013) asserts that a good interviewer is a good listener rather than a frequent speaker. By adopting this style, it did not mean that the researcher did not exist, because each idea shared was interpreted and filtered through the researcher's eyes, mind and point of view (Lichtman, 2010). The researcher is not trying to be an invisible researcher as in quantitative research, but is adopting their role of quietly constructing and interpreting the participant's reality through their critical lens.

The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder with an intelligent noise cut device which filtered out and eliminated all the exterior noise and room acoustics. An interview protocol which was prepared beforehand and pilot tested was used for the interviews (see appendix C). The protocol was loosely used because at times the researcher needed to change the questions in order to capture the relevant data. As an amateur, the researcher continually refined the questions and procedures as she delved deeper into more interviews and gained more confidence (Creswell, 2013).

### **3.13.3. Document Review**

Lichtman (2010) articulated that documentation is one of the methods used in historical research. She explains that documents are evidence of what people did, said and thought. Written materials created by participants either as a direct response to the research requests, or created for other purposes capture the thoughts, ideas and meanings of participants (Barber, 2008; Lichtman, 2010). These documents could be in the form of journals, notes, reflective and evaluative personal observations, curriculum documents, minutes of meetings, reports on performance, school policies or strategic planning documents. This study therefore used document review as a secondary source of data to compliment and clarify data gathered through the interviews (Dessinger & Moseley, 2004).

Participants were asked to provide the researcher with some of their day to day documents such as anecdotal notes, journal or diary entries, planning, reflection notes, class observation reports and/or extracts from their statements of intent

which pertained to AFL. Participants were not pressurised but were allowed to provide documents of their own choice. It was surprising to note that all the participants took time to think about the documents they provided because they were very relevant. The researcher took time to read through all these documents in an attempt to find underlying meanings in the words that were used in order to clarify and add on to the information provided in the interviews.

#### **3.13.4. Audio-visual Images**

Audio-visual information provides powerful data in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2010). They document aspects of social interaction which is one of the core characteristics of qualitative research. The Chinese quotation that says that, “a picture tells a thousand words” is so true. Images are loaded with information and meaning. The researcher is only limited by his/her own imagination and creativity when using audio-visual images. Lichtman, (2010) pointed out that digital audio-visual images and texts have reasserted their position as an important communication medium. Images enhance and embellish, and make alive the words we use to express our thoughts. In this digital age, audio-visual materials are central to our culture and communication. They create another avenue of meaning. They also provide a certain reality which can be captured by the researcher which gives insights about the phenomena and the participants’ views and perspectives. For example video images facilitate extraordinarily detailed inspection of data by the researcher which the participants may not have been able to articulate (Hindmarsh & Tutt, 2012).

In this study, audio-visual materials were used for data collection and reflective purposes only. Participants had been videoing their own practices for reflective purposes and professional development since they started using AFL. The researcher requested the participants to provide her with three videos each one from the initial stages, one from the middle and a more recent one. The researcher watched the videos over and over in order to identify themes which were consistent with those that came out of the interview transcripts and document reviews. She also noted some new themes which could be useful to the research. These videos brought the researcher into the classroom and helped her to observe the participants’ interactions and actions.

### **3.14. Data Analysis**

The aim of data analysis is to draw valid meaning from the data that has been collected. Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) state that qualitative data analysis involves data reduction and display, and conclusion drawing. They assert that data reduction is the process of selecting, simplifying, abstracting and transforming raw data from interviews, observations and other forms of data collection. Lichtman (2010) adds that qualitative data analysis is inductive and iterative. This involves the preparation and organisation of data (such as texts from transcripts, document review and audio-visual review notes) for analysis (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data is then reduced into themes and categories through the process of coding and condensing the codes (Huberman & Miles, 2007). Finally data is then presented as an “organised assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking” (p.21) in the form of figures, tables and discussion points.

Data analysis requires honesty, integrity and rigorous analytical procedures. In this research, data analysis was informed by three recognised approaches which are discourse analysis, thematic analysis and constant comparison method (Adams, Khan, Raeside, & White, 2007; Braun, 2006; van Heugten, 2004). Discourse analysis focuses on uncovering “the larger patterning of thought that structures the way language is used (Charmaz, 2006, p.265). This involves an examination and a deconstruction of language in use with reference to contexts in which the text is embedded (Mutch, 2005). Braun and Clarke describe thematic analysis as “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes data set in (rich) detail. However it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p.79). The constant comparison method involves the researcher in an iterative process of continually comparing and contrasting themes and categories of data to ensure the development of a coherent and cogent explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (Adams et al., 2007; Suter, 2012). Procedures and processes associated with these three approaches were used in a reflexive and flexible manner to analyse the case study.

Because the researcher was an amateur, she asked her supervisor to assist her code the first interview transcript in order to develop confidence and understanding of the process. This process also helped address consistency in the

interpretation of data. Data was analysed using the data analysis software Nvivo which allowed the researcher to code all the sources of information including the audio-visual material. After doing the first interview with her supervisor, the researcher proceeded by reading and re-reading the rest of the data in order to identify key themes and categories called nodes in Nvivo. Open codes that reflected emerging ideas, concepts, patterns were assigned to data (Ezzy, 2002; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The coding process was carried out on copies of the original transcripts and other files so that the raw data remained intact, in case it was needed for further coding if necessary. The transcripts were laid out in such a way that they allowed the researcher to make notes and comments as she coded. These allowed the researcher to create queries in Nvivo during data analysis in order to clarify certain points or make comparisons. The open codes were then clustered and re-organised by themes, concepts or relationship allowing for the emergence of axial codes (Adams, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1998). Axial codes are created when a researcher engages in inductive and deductive thinking in order to identify relationships among open codes. This iterative and interpretive process was carried out until the scheme of classifying and understanding the meaning of the data was coherent (Suter, 2012).

### **3.15. Plausibility**

Unlike quantitative research which uses numbers and statistical evidence to prove the dependability and validity of their research, the validity of qualitative research is often established by the application of evaluative criteria such as dependability (trustworthiness), transferability, and credibility (Adams, et al., (2007); Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Suter, 2012).

#### **3.15.1. Credibility**

Adams, Khan, Raeside and White (2007) articulates that credibility refers to the ability of the researcher to capture the tacit knowledge of the participants and to give credible explanations for their statements and aspects of their social life. One way researchers could check their subjectivity and the credibility of their findings is through “ stakeholder checks” (Suter, 2012, p. 346). In this research participants were given the opportunity to validate the accuracy of their transcribed data and the findings and were invited to comment on the researcher’s interpretations of their data which was collected as well as on issues pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher also used peer

debriefing with her supervisor in order to check honesty, working hypothesis and identify next steps (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 1996). This involved the researcher holding regular debriefing sessions with her supervisor to discuss the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretations. The researcher also held discussions with a colleague from a different institution who is also involved in Master level research. These processes helped to challenge the researcher's thinking and findings which resulted in the production of credible findings.

### **3.15.2. Dependability**

Dependability is primarily concerned with the consistency of results obtained from data and is often ensured by carrying out what Suter (2010, p.346) calls "consistency checks." Merriam (2008) also explained that researchers need to ensure that outsiders concur that the data used and provided and the results make sense and can be depended on. Suter asserts that this could be done by allowing independent coders to sample raw data and create codes and categories so that the consistency of data analysis can be assessed. In this research, this was achieved by allowing the researcher's supervisor to assist with the first coding process. Secondly, triangulation of data collection methods allowed the sighting of the phenomenon in different points of reference (Adams, et al., 2007). There is debate on whether triangulation can prove truth (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Richardson, 2000). However, Richardson argues that it can only provide an illumination of the truth from a particular standpoint. In this investigation, triangulation of methods was used to add another point of view and/or support the interview data. Documents and audio-visual materials were additional sources of data used to strengthen credibility and dependability.

### **3.15.3. Transferability**

Transferability is concerned with the generalisation of findings to other sites and similar situations (Merriam, 1994). Transferability can be enhanced when researchers construct detailed, rich descriptions which provide sufficient information to enable readers to judge their applicability to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings from this study contain both rich and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon and concepts and insights levered from data that allows the reader to understand the perceptions of educators on the

effectiveness of AFL with students with CLDD. It is assumed that findings and insights from this study will resonate within the study site as well as other settings, and will therefore be of use to others interested in researching the approach or those who are considering its use.

### **3.16. Summary**

A qualitative research framework, specifically an interpretive case study, was chosen as the preferred methodology. This study was underpinned by the researchers ontological and epistemological assumptions that there are multiple realities and that knowledge is individually or socially constructed. Data was gathered through audio recorded interviews, document and audio-visual material review to ensure triangulation. Interviews were transcribed in order to provide texts for analysis through coding. Ethical issues of confidentiality, anonymity and conflict of interest were discussed. Lastly the researcher dealt with issues pertaining the plausibility of the research. A reflexive approach permeated the research process to enhance the value and trustworthiness of the study.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and present findings from the ten participants of this project. The findings are based on the data from the interviews conducted with the participants, information gathered through reviewing school documents and videos which the participants provided voluntarily. The findings are presented in three parts. Firstly, a description of the ten participants will help give insight and understanding of their responses and perspectives. Secondly, the perceptions of the participants on the effectiveness of using Assessment for learning (AFL) with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) are going to be described. Lastly, more findings are going to be discussed and structured around the research questions that guide this study. This last section is going to only tackle additional findings that have not been described in the other sections. In writing this chapter, an attempt is going to be made to present the data in a meaningful way, by supporting it with quotations and descriptions drawn from interviews, video and documents' review.

### **4.1 Background information of the participants**

#### **4.1.1. Participant A**

Participant A has taught in New Zealand for over thirty years, starting in mainstream education and later switching over to special education more than twenty years ago. This teacher was part of the pilot group that introduced assessment for learning at this school. She is one of the senior teachers in the school and has been practicing assessment for learning with her class for more than eleven years. When asked why they decided to introduce assessment for learning she said,

“This all came from a study done by a psychologist who was looking at the effectiveness of our learning and he had developed a lot of assessment for learning theory and practice that is now widely used here in New Zealand, that is Michael Absolum. It certainly showed that there were better ways of interacting with students, for them to become partners in learning.”

This participant teaches senior students of ages 14 to 21 who are higher functioning and are in a satellite class (a special needs class based in a mainstream setting where students are integrated with their mainstream counterparts in certain areas or subjects). All students in her class have

intellectual disabilities which co-occur with other disabilities such as physical disabilities, Down's syndrome, autism and behaviour problems. Most of them also have communication problems due to their disabilities or to developmental delay.

Participant A, articulated her understanding of assessment for learning as

“---working alongside the student to recognise exactly where they are at in their learning and see exactly where they need to go next in order to achieve particularly long term goals, so that they can plan a pathway for learning for that student.”

Although, participant A is still practicing in the classroom, she is also part of the senior management team. Her responsibilities include curriculum development, mentoring provisionally registered teachers as well as being a subject leader for mathematics. This participant believes that the use of assessment for learning “revitalised her teaching.”

#### **4.1.2 Participant B**

This participant has been in the teaching profession for 35 years both overseas and here in New Zealand. She started her teaching career as a regular mainstream primary school teacher. She diverted into Special Education 21 years ago and she proclaims that she enjoys it. At the moment she is teaching a class of 11 to 20 year old students who have severe and multiple disabilities coupled with very fragile medical health problems. These learners all have intellectual disabilities co-existing with severe physical disabilities and medical problems. None of these students can use their limbs independently and three quarters of the class are partially blind.

When asked whether she believed these students to be capable learners, she explained that,

“---every child has a right to learn and that it was their right to attend school.”

However, this did not answer the question at hand. When further quizzed on whether she saw them as capable learners she asserted that everyone had the capability to learn to the best of their abilities.

Participant B has been practicing assessment for learning for the past three years and she described it as,

“—a measuring tool which measures whether the goals that had been set for the students have been achieved through the help of the success criteria”

When asked how often she uses assessment for learning in her class, she reported that it was an everyday practice which could be traced right through from her planning to the actual classroom practice. She believes that assessment for learning gives her a sense of direction and precision in her teaching and that it gives her tools with which to measure success.

#### **4.1.3 Participant C**

Participant C is one of the senior managers and has 33 years' experience in the field of education. She started her teaching career as a regular mainstream primary school teacher. She has taught both here in New Zealand and overseas. She branched into special education some 25 years ago. She worked in special educations for 9 years overseas and came back to New Zealand where she taught students with multiple disabilities for about 10 years. She later became part of the management team while she also juggled those responsibilities with a class. The students whom she taught had intellectual disabilities which co-occurred with physical disabilities, as well as cortical visual impairments. Most of these students were non-verbal which means they could not express their knowledge or their understanding. Presently, participant C is a full-time senior manager who has not been practicing in the classroom for the past 6 years.

When asked whether she believed that the student whom she taught and all the students in the school were capable learners she articulated that,

“I believe all students are learners. It is just a measure of finding the unique way of teaching them, finding a way in, being very precise in your teaching and maximizing on learning opportunities.”

She used assessment for learning in the later years of her classroom practice. She described it as,

“—focussed assessment that provided feedback to students and which enabled them to work with you [the teacher] to find the way forward in their learning.”

She believes assessment for learning helps teachers to be precise in their teaching and to be clear on what they want the students to achieve. She asserted that assessment for learning is functional and practical allowing students and teachers to work in partnership while seeking the way forward in the teaching/learning process. By so doing, learning focussed relationships are developed. She stated that this process demonstrates a high level of respect for the students by involving them because most of the time in their day to day lives and in the community, things are just done to them and for them.

#### **4.1.4 Participant D**

This participant has been teaching in special education for 29 years both overseas and here in New Zealand. Currently she is teaching a class of higher functioning students of ages 5 to 11, all of whom have intellectual disabilities which coexist with Down's syndrome, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). When asked whether she believed her students to be capable learners, she asserted that when necessary adaptations are made and put in place these students can learn.

Prior to this whole school professional development which the school started three years ago, she had been using some aspects of assessment for learning throughout her career. Assessment for learning was introduced into the school ten years ago but no sustainability plan was put in place so most teachers either dropped it or some like participant D kept using only aspects of it. She started it again fully three years ago and is endeavouring to make it a culture of her classroom. She described assessment for learning as a,

‘–continuous process of inquiry used to find out barriers of learning in the students.’”

When asked to further explain what she meant by that, she pointed out that it allows you to give “ownership of learning to the students by sharing the learning intentions and success criteria with them.”

#### **4.1.5. Participant E**

Participant E is a high school trained teacher who has worked in mainstream as an English teacher. She also has a nursing background. This participant has been a teacher for 40 years, 20 of which are in this same school. She has also taught overseas and here in New Zealand. Currently, she is teaching a class of profoundly,

intellectually and multiply disabled 14 to 19 year old students. Most of these students are physically disabled due to cerebral palsy and most of them also suffer from epilepsy which is controlled by medication. The majority of them are tube fed and are non-verbal and some are cortically blind with minimum or no use of limbs. When asked whether she believed these students to be capable learners she simply said

“—I am sure they can learn---- although their communication is quite different from normal verbal communications in other classes.”

She has been using assessment for learning in her classroom for the last two years. She described assessment for learning as a practice that allows students to take responsibility of their own learning , understand what they are learning and why, and how they are learning it. She stated that the assessment for learning process also enabled the teacher and students to assess what has been learnt and what the next steps are. However, she was not sure about the appropriateness of using this practice with her type of students.

#### **4.1.6. Participant F**

This participant has been a teacher for 26 years both overseas and in New Zealand. She started off as a mainstream primary school teacher who later ventured into special education 12 years ago. She mostly worked with students who had physical disabilities and those with autism. Currently she has a full-time management role and has been out of the classroom for 3 years. She believes that every student has the capability to learn. She commented that

“ it is just a matter of figuring out what those particular students need to learn and using the best strategies for teaching them”

Participant F used assessment for learning overseas with a group of special needs students 12 years ago prior to coming to New Zealand. Here in New Zealand she has attended an intensive two year professional development course on the use of assessment for learning. In her role as senior manager she is using that knowledge to support teachers in the school on how to use assessment for learning with their students. She described assessment for learning as,

“a process of assessing what the student needs to learn and working out ways to teach them, show them how they have made progress and how

they can check their own work in order to find better ways to achieve the goals that are set.”

#### **4.1.7. Participant G**

Participant G has been a teacher for 30 years both overseas and here in New Zealand. She originally trained as a mainstream primary school teacher. She joined the special education sector 10 years ago when she migrated to New Zealand. She is currently teaching a new entrant class of 5 to 7 year olds who are all intellectually disabled. Their intellectual disabilities coexist with other conditions such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder, autism, and Down’s Syndrome. She believes that these students are capable learners provided that effective strategies and adaptations are put in place.

This participant has been using AFL with her students with CLDD for the last 10 years. She was part of the core-group that underwent the two year intensive training and is now one of the lead teachers for AFL who are training and supporting the rest of the staff in implementing these practices in their classrooms. She views assessment for learning as a process where students take ownership of their own learning. She defines it as,

“on-going assessment throughout the learning process where the teacher and the learner work together to identify gaps and to address how they can be bridged”

#### **4.1.8. Participant H**

She has been in the education sector for about 25 years. She is a trained mainstream primary school teacher who has overseas and New Zealand experience. She joined the special education sector 9 years ago and also worked as a behaviour itinerant teacher. Currently she is teaching a class of 14 to 16 year olds who have intellectual disabilities that co-occur with other conditions such as autism, epilepsy, Down’s Syndrome and other behavioural issues.

She started using AFL two years ago and she says it is part of her everyday practice. She describes assessment for learning as the process whereby the teacher needs to be clear on what he/she needs the students to learn and then share it with them. She also explained that the teacher and the students in partnership need to co-construct the success criteria of whatever it is they are learning so that they can be able to monitor their progress and figure out the

next steps after self- and peer assessment. She asserted that assessment for learning helps students to take ownership of their own learning.

#### **4.1.9. Participant I**

This participant is a teacher aide in the school and she has worked in this role for over two years, and has been in this school for slightly under one and a half years. She helps in a new entrant class with students with intellectual disabilities , autism, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and Down's Syndrome. She works with a teacher who uses AFL every day. She is also using it with students on a day to day basis in most activities she does with individual children or with groups. She described AFL as a "fun way and easy way which helps students to learn by following a set of success criteria and assessing their own work." She asserts that AFL has made positive impact in the learning of their students.

#### **4.1.10. Participant J**

Participant J has worked in this school for 16 years as a teacher aide. She works with 8-12 year olds who have multiple disabilities including intellectual and physical disabilities which co-exist with other disabilities such as autism, epilepsy and Down's syndrome. She asserts that AFL is part of their everyday practice in the classroom. However, when asked to explain what she understands by assessment for learning, she was not able articulate it.

Table 2 below shows the summary of all the participants' information and their employment of AFL.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of years teaching</b>	<b>No. Of Yrs. using AFL</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Type of students taught.</b>	<b>Character and personality</b>	<b>Understanding of AFL</b>	<b>Level of use of AFL</b>
<b>A</b>	30+ years	10 years	TR	HF-satellite students with intellectual disabilities co-existing with other secondary disabilities. High school level	Innovative and eager to own practices and student learning	Solid understanding of what AFL is	Very high level of employment
<b>B</b>	35 years	3 years	TR	LF-Multiply disabled students with complex medical problems coupled as well as cortical blindness and are non-verbal. Intermediate level.	Partially innovative and sometimes scared to try new things	Limited understanding of what AFL is	relatively high level of employment
<b>C</b>	33 years	3 years	SM	LF-Multiply disabled students with complex medical problems coupled as well as cortical blindness and are non-verbal. No longer in the classroom	Innovative and loves to try explore new strategies	Solid understanding of what AFL is.	Partial employment in meetings.

D	29 years		TR	HF-satellite students with intellectual disabilities co-existing with other secondary disabilities. Primary school level	Partially innovative-likes to change things that do not take her out of her comfort zone.	Limited understanding of what AFL is.	Partial employment
E	40 years	2 years	TR	LF-Multiply disabled students with complex medical problems coupled as well as cortical blindness and are non-verbal. High school level	Conservative, not so willing to innovate.	Partial understanding of what AFL is which hinders full implementation with her group of students	Partial employment
F	26 years	5 years	SM	LF- Multiply disabled students with intellectual and physical disabilities co-existing with autism. No longer in the classroom	Innovative-likes to try new practices and strategies	Good understanding of the process but not the definition	Partial employment
G	30 years	10 years	TR	LF- partially verbal students with intellectual disabilities co-occurring with autism, ADHD and down' Syndrome. New entrants	Innovative-likes to explore practices to improve her teaching and students' learning	Reasonable understanding of what AFL is.	Relatively high level of employment

H	25 years	2 years	TR	LF- partially verbal students with intellectual disabilities co-occurring with autism, ADHD and Down's Syndrome. High school level	Innovative-likes to try new things which improves her practice	Good understanding of the process but not the definition.	Very high employment
I	2 years	11/2 years	TA	LF- partially verbal students with intellectual disabilities co-occurring with autism, ADHD and down' Syndrome	N/A	Relatively good understanding	Relatively High employment
J	16 years	Unknown	TA	LF-Multiply- disabled junior level students who are partially verbal.	N/A	Seems not to understand what AFL is.	partial employment

*Table 2 : Summary of all participants and their employment of AFL*

LF- Low functioning      HF-Higher functioning      SM- Senior manager

TR-teacher      TA- Teacher aide

## **4.2. Participants perceptions on the use of AFL with students with CLDD.**

### **4.2.1. Students as learners**

All participants in this study believed that the learners in their school who have complex learning difficulties and disabilities can learn and are capable learners. However, this belief has not always been there in all of them. Some used to regard them as children or young people who needed care. Since the introduction of AFL in the school, participants have since seen the potential and capabilities in each and every one of their students. However, there were varying convictions in that belief which are reflected in the participants' interview responses. For example, all the other participants except B and E were quite confident in the capabilities of their students as learners. Although participants B and E claim that their students can learn, their claims were not as confident as the rest. Participant B mainly emphasised that students came to school to learn and that it is their right. It appears that the emphasis is on the rights and not on their capabilities as learners. On the other hand, participant E said “---I am sure they can learn---.” Her body language and tone of voice did not display the conviction of one who totally believes in the capability of her students. On further investigating why these two participants looked less confident in their students' capabilities as learners, it was discovered that they team-teach the same group of students who are the most challenging in the school. These students have multiple disabilities that are profound which are coupled with complex medical health problems. Because of their physical disabilities nearly all of them have limited or no use of their limbs at all and they are all non-verbal. Seventy-five percent of the class are cortically blind. Because of the complexity of these students' needs, it is very difficult for these teachers to have much meaningful feedback from the students to show how much they have assimilated and therefore difficult to ascertain that learning has taken place. Even the senior managers commented on the complexity of this group of students. Participant C articulated that,

“They would find it very hard communicating their opinions of theirs and another child's work. It does not mean they don't have them but we are all struggling to find ways for them to easily communicate.”

Participant F who is one of the managers also portrayed the same sentiment by saying,

“- but I also think you never know what those students are taking in because they can’t verbally tell you- they might be taking in a huge amount of information”

Although these managers were empathetic to the complexity of the needs of this group of students, their overall beliefs were just like everybody else who believed that every student is a learner. They acknowledged that it was just a matter of unlocking the potential through the use of effective strategies coupled with necessary adaptations and accommodations in order for the students to access the learning. For example, participant C highlighted that,

“—all children learn. It is just a measure of finding the unique way of teaching them-----, and maximizing their learning potential.”

Similarly, participant F claimed that

“every student has the capability to learn---- and we just need to figure out what that student needs to learn---- and the best possible way.”

On the same note participant D asserted that,

“ ---with a little bit of adaptations and putting strategies in place, they [students] will learn.”

This same belief of students being capable learners has also been consistent with school policies and reflected in other reviewed documents such as curriculum plans and teacher planning and reflection notes. In the statement of intent (2012) and strategic plan (2013-2015) statements such as,

“Teaching is our way of life ----, we set high expectations for achievement for every student,----and we ensure learning is dynamic,”

go a long way in strengthening the point that regarding students as capable learners is a theme that is encouraged and that runs through the veins of this school. It also reveals the high expectations the school encourages teachers to set for their students. Consequently, a statement in the December (2012) report written by the principal stated that the use of AFL has sharpened teachers’ focus on what is being taught and learnt and why, which has led to increased learning

by the students, also goes further in justifying that students are regarded as capable learners despite their learning challenges and difficulties.

These beliefs and expectations can also be traced through the documents produced by teachers and through their classroom practices as observed in the videos that were reviewed. In all the videos, the trend that students were regarded as learners and that there was that expectation for them to learn was evident. All the other participants used all sorts of strategies such as visual cues, tactile materials, signing, switches and questioning in order to solicit responses and feedback from their students. On the contrary, participant B used teacher aides to give responses on behalf of the students. This seems to show that she had no confidence in her students as learners or that she had run out of ideas of how she can get responses from this challenging group of learners.

Although, there are those few who are not sure, most of the data from interviews, reviewed documents and videos reveal that there is a strong belief in the capabilities of the students to learn. This was revealed on a tree map generated from a query run through Nvivo which compared codes from all the different sources and presented it diagrammatically (see fig. 2 below)

Therefore, having established that there is a strong belief that students with CLDD are learners in this school, the study went on to explore the participants' perspectives on the use of AFL with these students. The participants' perceptions were grouped into two groups which were positive and negative.

### **4.3. Positive Perceptions**

Overall, participants' perceptions on the use of AFL with students with CLDD were very positive. From some of the comments passed by participants, it was revealed that before they started using AFL, they found it difficult to see their students as learners and they had low expectations of what the students could do. For instance, participant C mentioned that teachers in the school,

“ felt that our students can't do that--- then after using AFL consistently they go wow, I did not expect my students to be able to do that.”

This was also illustrated by participant G's comments when she said,

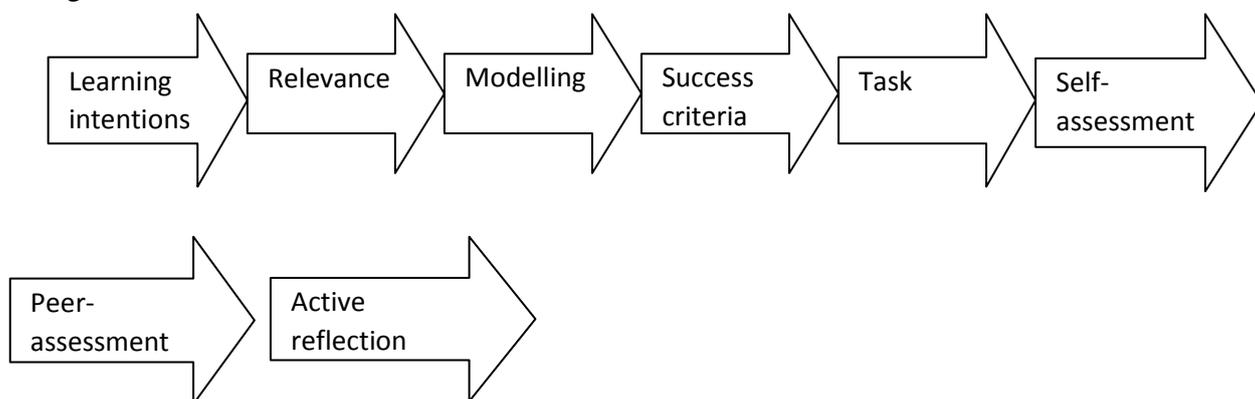
“ prior to my using AFL, I was at a loss how to meet the need of, and support these students in their learning.”

There was a general consensus that assessment for learning enhanced the participants classroom practice and to a certain extent gave them a measure of success and satisfaction in their job. After analysing all their interviews and documents there were some common perspectives that continually ran through the data.

#### **4.3.1 AFL brings clarity about what is to be learnt (in teaching and learning)**

All the participants in this investigation agreed on the clarity that AFL brought to the teachers and to the students about what they were supposed to teach or learn. The AFL framework put forward by Absolum (2006) which is being used in the school has a clear and precise pathway which teachers can adapt and use in their teaching (See fig 1 below).

Fig.1



*Figure 1 : AFL framework as adapted from Absolum M. (2006)*

This brought focus and clarity about what is to be taught , because teachers thought harder about what they were expecting students to learn and how to share the expectations with their students. When that clarity was there, it was also evident through teacher documentation that it transcended even into their planning and classroom practice as evidenced in the videos watched. These teachers learnt to share their expectations with the students which also brought clarity to the students about what they were learning and how because the learning was explicit through the AFL framework which they followed. The use of modelling and the co-construction of success criteria with the students also enhanced the clarity. With this clarity it was observed that students became more focussed and motivated.

Throughout the video clips that were reviewed , participants explored a range of strategies which they felt were effective and meaningful to their students, which

they used to share the learning intentions and to present the criteria so that it was visible to the students. These included the use of visual cues such as the Meyer Johnson symbols, the use switches such as Big Macks, and sign language to enhance meaning and understanding. In most of the videos that were reviewed it was observed that most teachers always reminded their students to refer to their success criteria which were their guidelines on how to complete their tasks with some measure of independence. The success criteria also helped students to monitor their own learning through self- and peer assessment.

Participant H in her interview remarked that she cannot see herself teaching in any other way because AFL brought clarity first to herself and then to the students she taught. She pointed out that by sharing learning intentions with the students and co-constructing success criteria, it made expectations and the learning trajectory clearer to the students. Furthermore, by using a range of AFL inspired resources processes and exemplars, it helped students to find information and to complete tasks more independently, for some who cannot be fully independent because of the nature of their disabilities, it enhanced interdependence. These same sentiments were reiterated by Participant C who articulated that,

“--- very careful planning is needed-----, you needed to be very prepared for what you were needing to teach, so that you had all the necessary resources prepared and that you made all the visual cue cards-----“

For participants H, B and G, this preparedness and the use of a range of resources was very evident in their videos and planning that were reviewed. They used a range of resources and strategies to involve their students and to elicit their participation.

#### **4.3.2. Reflective practices**

When data from all the data sources used in this study was explored and analysed and represented on a tree map of perspectives (see fig 2 below) .

Nodes compared by number of items coded



Figure 2: Tree map of Perspectives

Figure 2 demonstrates that reflective practices were discovered to be the most popular benefit of AFL both to teachers and to students. Black et al., (2006) asserted that reflective thinking is the highest aspect of metacognition as an important framework of understanding thinking and learning. Students need to be given time and opportunities to reflect on their learning. This perspective was very evident through most of the participants' interviews and through their practices viewed in the sample videos. It was also encouraged through expectations laid out in school policy documents such as the strategic plans of 2013-2015. While exploring data through Nvivo, it was noted that reflective practices was coded 57 times in 14 sources, whereas the second highest, which is autonomy was coded only 34 times. This shows how much importance is attached to it. Policy documents such as school generated curriculum plans , strategic plans for 2012 and 2013-2015 and school goals for 2012/2013 reflected clearly how

the school's policies encourage reflective practices. In the curriculum plan p.8 a statement such as,

“effective practitioners model AFL principles when they encourage reflection, questioning and evaluation of their own, their support staff's and their students' learning.”

To make sure that this is happening all teachers in the school have been trained and are using video analysis and “open to learning” style feedback practices with their peer teachers and team leaders, then they evaluate their own practices and identify next steps to work on in order to improve. This practice has been mentioned in the strategic plan documents but for a stranger who is not familiar with this type of practice, the “how” is not clearly articulated. The researcher has been fortunate enough to see how it is done and followed through in professional development schedules, classroom practices (through the video evidence) and through participant interviews.

In classrooms that have verbal students, reflective practices are quite evident in the videos that were watched. Students are given opportunities to reflect on and review their learning through leading questions such as “What did you learn today?” “What helped you learn?” “What was tricky?” Or “What made it easy?” were the most prominent ones (evidence from videos of participants, A, B, D, H and G). Students in their varying disabilities were encouraged to reflect and answer them using a range of resources to the best of their abilities. In the videos, it was observed that most participants were conscious about giving students enough thinking time in order for them to process questions and what they were learning before they responded. Some of the participants encouraged metacognitive thinking through open ended questions such as “ what do think about----?” “How else could you do that?” (Participant A and H). Comments such as “good thinking you guys,” or “talk to your friend about what you have learnt,” were all statements that encouraged students to think and to reflect about their learning (participant G's video).

In the interviews statements such as ,“—it gave students self-worth and the ability to think about their thinking and learning,----- getting students to think for themselves where they are at in their learning and what they might want to do next---,” (participant A). Participant B who teaches more profoundly disabled

students also mentioned that they endeavour to teach these students how to reflect in their learning, through statements such as,

“ they are also learning to self-assess through the use of augmentative devices while supported by the teacher aides and we are working towards some active reflection.”

Participant F also asserted that,

“ when they [students] are thinking about their learning, what they are learning, how they are learning and their next steps, it develops their cognitive skills.”

All the above evidence reveal that reflective practices are being encouraged and are perceived as one of the most important aspects of learning in students with CLDD which is being enhanced by the use of AFL .

Participant C also pointed out that AFL is very inquiry based because,

“ --you are always looking at your practice and saying, did it work, where to from here, what is the next step-----, if something has not worked, it gives you that critical feedback and that time to self-reflect---.”

This statement demonstrates that in AFL, reflective practices are not only for students but more so for teachers. It gives them a degree of critical self-reflection through looking at their own practices and everything they do with the students in the classroom and find out ways of improving. All other participants except participant J mentioned reflective practices both in students and in teachers. This evidence shows that although these students have complex learning difficulties , the teachers are themselves reflecting in their practices in order to improve the ways their students learn and how to enhance active reflection in their students. They see this as an opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice and improve, alter or adjust their practice accordingly.

#### **4.3.3. Autonomy**

When data from all the data sources used in this study was explored using Nvivo, autonomy was perceived as the second most popular benefit of using AFL with learners with CLDD (Fig.2). Teacher perceptions were consistent with

those of researchers such as Absolum (2006), Black, Harrison. Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2004), James (2006), James and Peddler (2006), Marshall and Drummond (2006) and Wiliam (2011) who substantiated that one of the main purposes of implementing AFL is to encourage and enhance learner autonomy. Most of the participants have turned around their attitude from that of care to that of teaching students how to learn so that they can become lifelong learners. It can be traced through the videos that were viewed that as teachers began to consistently use AFL students began to develop critical and analytical skills, they began to ask questions about their learning and thinking processes. Their achievements are a culmination of skills and knowledge developed together over a period of time. Students are taught and encouraged into taking responsibility for their own learning using various strategies and words such as “we are learning this so that we can be able to do it ourselves,” (participant H’s second video). Evidence of this was seen in most of the videos whereby teachers endeavoured to motivate students to become autonomous by using a range of strategies and resources.

Assertions by participants in their interviews corroborate with the findings discussed in the previous paragraph. For example, participant A highlighted that AFL,

“–gives them confidence, better self-management-----, developing life skills, habits of mind, habits of behaviour and more independence.”

Participants B, C and E who teach or have taught students who are profoundly disabled. Although they know that their students may never be fully autonomous, they believe that AFL enhances interdependence which is an important skill in their lives if they are to become successful members of society and that goes a long way in making them critical citizens. Participant C further clarifies by explaining that,

“---- they will have greater incidences of interdependence , because the nature of their disabilities will always require them to have some support.”

Participant G and I who work in the same room and agree that the use of AFL is giving the students some form of autonomy. Participant G said “ I am involving my students more----- and they are beginning to work more independently,” and participant I commented that sometimes the students “take over from us and do things for themselves.” In her post observation reflective

notes participant G stated that she wanted this one particular student she was working with to “independently engage in learning activities.”

Participant D summed it up by articulating that although learning is broken down into small chunks, the ultimate goal is independence which they learn to achieve by following a set of criteria until they reach autonomy. For autonomy to be achieved students’ participation and involvement need to be the core of the classroom practice. Autonomous learners have a voice, take ownership of their learning and know how to manage themselves and their learning.

To sum up the positive perspectives and how participants feel about using AFL with students with CLDD, 8 of the participants were asked how they perceive the use of AFL (except the two teacher aides). Their responses are tabulated below:

**Table 3**

*Table 3: Participants Perspectives on AFL*

participant	Response
A	I think it is the best tool that we can use to assist learning. It can be linked to anything students do and every resource they use to enable them to do better and manage their lives better.
B	I feel positive and I would like to influence others and show them that it is a good thing.
C	It is best practice--- I think anyone who is not doing it, is not an effective special education teacher .
D	It is keeping everybody on their toes and teachers are learning too.-- ---you are always adapting your teaching strategies and putting them in place.
E	It is effective-- it stimulates us to do better and to change our practices--- to adapt and modify things to suit our students.
F	It makes teachers really think about the learning needs of their students, builds relationships between teachers and students because you are collaborating in setting goals, monitoring and finding the next steps.
G	Makes students take ownership ----- students become confident

	learners, better decision makers and build better relationships. It made me a better , more effective teacher in that I am meeting my students’ needs.
H	I wouldn’t want to teach any other way because I would feel like I am cheating the students.

#### 4.3.4. Communication

All the participants in this study corroborated that AFL has enhanced communication in their students whether they were verbal or non-verbal. This is evidenced in some of the interview quotes from participants interviews , for example participant C who is part of the senior management team commented that

“ I hear some of our students who can speak discussing what they are learning.”

Participant F who is another senior manager asserted that although it is hard to get feedback from students who have very high needs and are non-verbal, it is worthwhile for teachers to learn how these students communicate through their,

“ body language, facial expression and other ways they might communicate with you.”

Since AFL is mainly based on partnership of learning between the teacher and the student, communication needs to be at the foundation of it all, so participants in this study showed motivation to explore ways in which to communicate effectively with their students. Since it is a collaborative process, where feedback is the vehicle through which learning is shared between the teachers and students , communication is therefore paramount. Participant A expressed that through AFL students can,

“tell you exactly what they are learning, why they are learning it -----, even our students with severe intellectual disabilities know and show you what they are doing, why they are doing it.”

Participant G stated that although students in her classroom are non-verbal, they use visual cues to communicate their learning and how they are feeling about it

and what they want to do next, even though they are in a supported context. Participant J who is a teacher aide in one of the multiple disabled classes asserted that since they started using AFL with their class, their students are communicating more. She said

“one of our students ---[name] can now sign good morning, he can sign so many things. Another example is—[name], he talks well when we speak to him and he is beginning to respond verbally.”

Just from the cross-section of quotes above, it is clear that participants perceive that AFL has improved communication in their students which in turn might improve the quality of learning and learning focussed relationships. Better communication strategies enhanced understanding and clarity of expectations on the part of the students. It also enriches the feedback process between the teachers and the students. This is consistent with the assertions of Porter, Robertson and Mayhole (2000) in their multi-case study of classroom assessments of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities where they asserted that the use of AFL enhances communication skills and encourage personal and social skills. Communication is the key to all other skills in assessment for learning and it undergirds everything. Without some form of communication, teaching and learning becomes meaningless. Communication is a fundamental aspect linked to the progression of student learning. Effective communication allows for evaluation and feedback which are both important aspects for learning. It enables good relationships, active participation and shared understanding among all trans disciplinary team members

#### **4.3.5. Student participation and involvement**

About 90% of the participants in this study have asserted that since students started to communicate more and learning focussed - relationships strengthened, they are beginning to see more involvement and participation of the students in their learning. This perspective resonates with Black, et al, (2006) when they

articulated that learner involvement becomes ripe when a “social and community discourse” is established in the classroom. Involving students in their learning and allowing them the opportunities to participate at their own level is very empowering and motivating for students with very high learning difficulties and disabilities because they never get that in day to day life where they are considered as people who need care all the time and not capable to participate in social activities.

Students’ participation in most of the classes was prompted by the teachers and was perceived as a significant learning device, which when assessed identified the level of student understanding and provided feedback to and from the teacher. Participant C commented that,

“for many of our students, especially those with very high needs they have very little control of their lives because everything is done for them and to them,”

so involving them and giving them the opportunities to participate in learning and other school activities is empowering and shows that you trust in their capabilities as learners and human beings. This type of inclusion allows students to become collaborators in their own learning and therefore, they can easily take ownership of it.

Participant J also asserted that it is paramount that we

“make sure that they [students] are involved all the time ---, doing things with them and not for them.”

Participant F also reiterated the same point by saying that there is much more involvement of students in the school whereas prior to the introduction of AFL,

“there was a lot of stuff done for the students rather than with the students or alongside them.”

This data shows a real shift from seeing students with CLDD as passive beings who just wait for things to be done for them, to viewing them as active learners who can collaborate in their own learning. With students’ involvement and participation, teachers can now capture how students are learning and figure out how best they can support them in their learning. Involvement and participation of students in their learning encourages them to be autonomous learners.

#### **4.4. Negative perspectives**

Despite all the participants portraying overall positivity about the use of AFL there were some negative comments and perceptions that were picked up, especially in the interviews. On reviewing all the coded transcripts it was discovered that 25 statements were coded on negative perceptions. Of these 20 were coded in one participant's interview (participant E) who teaches profoundly multiply-disabled students who also have fragile medical health issues. Seventy-five per cent of her class are also cortically blind. Sixteen of the codes culminated from the lack of feedback from students.

Although this participant is using AFL with her students, she seems not to see the reason for using it and is failing to find ways to implement it. She does not see the practicality of how to use AFL with her students so she believes that it is inappropriate. Evidence of this is shown in one of her statements which said,

“With my students, I am not sure that it is totally appropriate because there is really no other way in any case, so it is better to use AFL than not to try and assess how much they have learnt. ---- Well, with some of the children it's working well and with some it might not be appropriate. It may not be accurate and useful. But I think I would combine it with other things as well if something else was appropriate, I would use that as well. I believe in compromise and you just use a little bit of everything and you just use what is best out of each.”

The evidence above shows that this teacher is at a loss how to implement AFL with her group of students. She seems to lack confidence in trialling new and innovative strategies that can suit the learning profiles of her students. Contrary to this self-doubt in her interview, when her videos were reviewed she seemed quite comfortable with her practices. She used a wide range of strategies and resources to try and engage the students and elicit responses using a range of senses. She observed the students' body language and commented appropriately at the little responses she got. This participant's frustration came from the fact that despite her best efforts to engage the students, to elicit their involvement and participation, there was very little or no response at all from the students due to their disabilities. These frustrations are shown in this statement from her interview,

“----but we still have this dilemma of how do we assess if they really understood what they were hearing or touching.---- I can't ask a question about a story, even a basic question like “where did she put the book?” There is no way, even if the one with vision sees the picture of the table, there is no way she can tell me, they might be able to look towards it, but she still has a vision defect which makes her look in two different directions so you have to know which eye to assess with, if you like. So I can't ask a question to get a verbal answer honestly, so if a child has eye-gaze, I can do an assessment if it's an accurate eye-gaze. If they could touch something, or if I could say to one who can use their hands “could you touch the truck”, he could differentiate but unfortunately, he won't always respond, but I would still try. He is tactile defensive, so he touches and pulls away though.”

One of the senior managers also commended on how difficult it is to communicate with this lot of students and how the school is still trying to figure out the best possible way, because these students have a cluster of disabilities which makes their learning profiles very blurred and complicated to figure out what to prioritise. Five of the negative codes on perspectives were coded in this senior manager's interview. Although, she believes in the effectiveness of AFL in the learning of these students, she still acknowledges how complex it is to effectively implement it.

#### **4.5 Findings according to research questions**

Some of the findings under perceptions have relevance for the research questions, so where that is the case the information was discussed where it was believed to most logically sit.

##### **4.5.1. Research question 1- What do special needs educators think about the effectiveness of AFL on students with CLDD?**

AFL was perceived as a type of ongoing assessment by seven ( A, C, D, E, F, G, H) out of the ten participants in the study . They believed it to be a partnership between the teacher and the student in monitoring the teaching/learning process and how to find ways for improvement and also figuring out the next steps. Although, participant E was able to describe AFL meaningfully, she could not

conceptualise it and see how it could be applied to her group of students. She regarded it as inappropriate because of the nature of her students' disabilities. One of the participants (B) described it as a measuring tool which measures how much students have achieved of their set goals. Her focus is on the assessment product rather than on the assessment for learning process, that is, measuring achievement rather than feedback oriented learning and assessment. Participant B and E team-teach the same class and yet their perceptions and practices are miles apart. This anomaly will be discussed in detail in the discussions chapter.

Two of the participants had no idea on how to define AFL. They see it being used and they support its implementation in their classrooms but have no clue what it is. These participants are the teacher aides. The way participants perceived AFL had a bearing on how it was being practiced in their classrooms. Although participant I could not soundly describe what AFL is, she was conversant about the process and the benefits that she could see in their students. On the contrary, participant J was not conversant with what AFL is, nor the process. The researcher's observation was that she struggled understanding the questions in English, although the researcher tried to simplify the questions as much as she could without losing the meaning and/or without leading the participant. This might be because English is her second language and therefore she could not fully understand the questions as well as express herself eloquently.

#### **4.5.1. 1. AFL as "the" approach**

Most of the participants in the study perceived AFL as the ultimate approach if you are to become a successful special education teacher. Participant A in her perceptions seemed to have summed up the perceptions of most of her peers when she asserted that AFL is the best tool to assist learning that is linked to everything that students do and every resource they use while engaging in a learning partnership with the teachers and their peers. In this particular instance AFL becomes a matter of design and usage. It does not refer to anyone mode of assessment, but is believed be able to be used formatively in whatever teaching and learning process. The key here is not in the type or level of students taught but in how to design assessment and how to use the assessment information to enhance the feedback loop which will in turn enrich teaching and learning.

Participant F corroborated by stating that AFL was making a difference in the classroom practice for the teachers in her school because it was making,

“teachers really think about the learning needs of their students ----- it is building those learning focussed relationships between teachers and students because you are collaborating in setting goals, monitoring progress and setting the next steps together,-----teachers are seeing students more as learners than they did before and they are more focussed in their planning and teaching.”

This statement encapsulates the sentiments that came up in most of the interviews especially those of classroom teachers.

Similarly, participant C posited that

“----- there is lots of feedback to and from the teacher and students which is motivating to both and helps with ---- precision planning and teaching.”

Furthermore, participant G affirmed that AFL “makes students to take ownership of their learning -----, they own their learning, build better relationships and become confident learners and better decision makers.” She also added that it made her a better and more effective teacher. Participant E also proclaimed that AFL is effective and it stimulates teachers to do better and to endeavour to reflect on their practices in order to modify and adapt them.

From the above summations it can be assumed that most of the participants regard AFL as the ultimate tool for them which engages students with CLDD and make them co-constructors of their own destinies. It is assumed that when students are engaged, their learning improves and therefore they produce better outcomes. It helps teaching through the exchange of feedback during the learning process. Accordingly, any learning problems that arise in the process are solved earlier. From the above data it can be denoted that AFL also gives teachers information about their own practices enabling them to change and adapt.

Eighty percent of the participants in this study perceive AFL as an effective strategy to use with learners with CLDD. Ten percent have doubts on its effectiveness and the practicality of its implementation considering the nature of some of the students’ disabilities. The remaining ten percent were not very

conversant with AFL so it was hard to get consistent accurate information from them.

#### **4.5.2. Can these students access AFL like any other learners? If not what needs to be done?**

With this question there was a real division of opinions about whether students with CLDD access AFL in the same way their peers in the regular mainstream classes do. Responses were obtained from eight of the participants because the two teacher aides exempted from this questions. Fifty percent believed that students with CLDD access AFL in the same way with their peers as long as necessary adaptations and modifications are made to the implementation of the process. Participant H stated that,

“I think they will learn regardless of their ability levels. A child learns as long as they are taught.”

This participant seems to believe that adjustments or not, if you just teach the learner, they will learn. However, after reviewing her videos and practice, it was discovered that she made a lot of adaptations and adjustments for her students in order for them to access AFL. For instance, when she was doing self-assessment, she used a lot of visual symbols and a pixon board to assist students to communicate their learning and to understand what they were doing.

Contrary, participant C and G highlighted that adaptations and adjustments need to be done on the implementation strategies but not in the process. Participant C asserted that,

“--yes they can- not exactly in the same way but we don't access the curriculum in the same way either, yet we do access the same curriculum. I think it's a matter of --if I can liken it to eating an apple, it's the size of the bite you take and the amount of chewing I guess -- you got to take a smaller bite. You've got be a bit more precise and some of it needs to have a lot more supports in place. You know like the zone of proximal development- you've got a structure that can support them between what they can do and what you want them to do and put in those supports.”

Participant G agrees that the principles of AFL do not change but the difference is in the implementation strategies. It is in finding meaningful ways of

presenting it so that it makes sense to the students. For example, whereas in mainstream the teacher could write a learning intention on the whiteboard or on any other media they might be using, or give them success criteria sheets or cards to read, with students with CLDD the teacher may have to find alternative ways of presenting them, such as using visual symbols, augmentative communication devices or sign language.

Participant A also claimed that although students with CLDD access AFL in the same way as their counterparts in the mainstream, there are other areas that are a bit complicated for these students. She expanded by saying,

“Mostly, I would perhaps question – doing plenary is more complicated and complex, we have to give longer time and use different strategies for plenary sessions to really understand what the students have learnt.”

Contrary to all the above, participant E does not believe that students with CLDD access AFL in the same way their mainstream counterparts do. She perceives that these students are not capable of understanding the AFL process as their mainstream peers do because they cannot communicate their understanding. She fails to see how they are capable of taking ownership of their learning, especially her group of students who are profoundly disabled. Judging from her statements and body language in the interview, she is struggling to envision the capability of her students to show or communicate in some way what they have understood and how to figure out the next steps in their learning. To the contrary, participant C in her interview asserted that the fact that these students cannot communicate their understanding, does not mean they have not understood.

Whereas participant D and F did not know whether students with CLDD access AFL in the same way with their mainstream peers. Participant D has always been a special needs educator, so she has no idea what AFL looks like in mainstream. Participant F was not sure because she was not sure whether students with CLDD thought about school in the same way their mainstream counterparts do.

Lastly, for an unknown reason participant B was not asked questions relating to this particular question. Maybe, it was an error of omission.

### **4.5.3. Can these students access AFL like every other learner? If not what is done?**

#### **4.5.3.1. Adaptations and accommodations**

All 8 participants who were asked this question were in agreement that adaptations, adjustments and accommodations were required in order for students with CLDD to access and navigate easily and meaningfully through the processes of AFL. The adaptations, adjustments and accommodations were grouped in three categories which are those tied up with vision problems, those tied up with communication problems and those that are related to teaching strategy.

##### **4.5.3.1.1. Tied up with communication problems**

About ninety per cent of the students in the school have communication problems either due to their disabilities or due to developmental delays, so there is a real need to make adaptations and modifications that allow them to access language and to understand and use it effectively. There are a range of strategies and tools that are used in the school such as the use of visual symbols (Meadon, Ostrosky, Triplett, Michna & Fettig; 2011). There is a large percentage of students in the school who have autism and they have difficulties dealing with and understanding too many words. However, they relate well to and understand visual symbols better. Therefore most of the teachers in the school have students with autism in their classes, which is why the majority use visual symbols to share learning intentions and to enhance the co-construction of success criteria. Visual symbols also make it simple for them to understand self and peer-assessment templates and resources. Although, visual symbols are suitable for students with autism, they also benefit the rest who have communication issues. They are also beneficial to those students who are non-verbal but who can use their limbs. They can use the visual symbols to communicate their understanding with the teachers and peers.

Furthermore, they can use the picture exchange communication system (PECs) as a means of communicating their wants, needs and understanding (Bondy & Frost; 1994). Picture exchange communication system is an augmentative communication system used to teach students with autism and other related developmental delays, self-initiating functional communication skills. It usually increases social communicative behaviours in these students. Teachers in this school are using it in

the AFL process and it is helping to increase communication of learning and communication between the student and the teacher.

Other augmentative devices which were used in the school to enhance the AFL process with students with CLDD are Big Mack switches, communication boards and pixon boards. The use of these devices was evident in all the videos that were viewed and it showed that they help students organise their thoughts and formulate their sentences. Students in these videos were at ease while using these devices revealing that these were adaptations that were necessary and helpful to the students.

Another form of communication that was evident in the videos was sign language. All the teachers and teacher aides in this school are trained in using the Makaton sign language. This type of sign language is an internationally recognised form of communication which uses speech, gestures, symbols and words to aid communication. Makaton was chosen in this school because it combines speech and signs. As a student begins to vocalise more the signing is reduced until that point where the student's speech is understandable. So in AFL teachers sign a lot when sharing the learning with the students and the students do the same.

Video and voice recordings were also used with students as reminder prompts of what students had done in order to self- and peer-assess. Participants therefore, needed to establish communication systems that were suitable for their groups of students, since AFL requires a lot of teacher-student and student-student communication. These adaptations and modifications were really necessary to enhance the AFL process.

#### **4.5.3.1.2. Adaptations and modifications tied with vision problems**

A small percentage, maybe one or two per cent of the school population have cortical blindness or suffer from other kinds of vision related problems. They also need adaptations in order for them to access AFL. Participants B and E have the bulk of the students with vision health problems. According to participant E, she has had to use a lot of tactile objects and props which the students can feel. They also try to exploit the senses as much as possible, that is sound, smell, taste and touch whenever possible and whenever necessary. For sound they utilise Big Mack switches which have pre-recorded sounds and messages. Students are

supported or prompted to press the switches because most of them do not have full use of their limbs. They also use touch screens with pre-loaded sounds. All these are different ways used by the teachers to try and expand students' opportunities for accessing different processes of AFL.

#### **4.5.3.1.3. Modifications to teaching strategies**

For students with CLDD, curriculum calibration is an essential process that the school had to go through. In the curriculum plan that was reviewed during the documents review, there was evidence that the school took the national curriculum and calibrated it to suit the needs and learning styles of the students in the school. This process is further broken down at classroom level where personalised learning experiences are explored, shared and negotiated with students and families during the Individual Education Plans process. This was evident in the teacher documents that were reviewed which included teacher planning and how it related to the Individual Education Plans and then unpacked through AFL. The school's Individual Education Plans process was changed last year to conform with the AFL process where the student's learning intentions and success criteria are laid down, as well as the monitoring process. This involvement of the learners and their families is motivating because it makes the learning process explicit and meaningful to them.

Apart from calibrating the curriculum, participants have seen a great need to engage in pedagogical reconciliation, whereby they adapt their teaching strategies in order to suit the learning profiles of their students. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, participants in this study have had to explore literature to find meaningful ways of communicating with their students, for example using picture exchange system and visual symbols, and Makaton which is especially effective with students with Down's Syndrome. These are some of the ways they are using successful pedagogies for individual disabilities to match with their students' learning profiles.

Throughout the interviews, documents and video reviews, there was evidence of participants creating new innovative teaching and learning strategies in order for AFL to be accessible and meaningful for their students. Accommodations that were mainly common were those of time. In some instances, participants had found the need to increase or decrease the time allocated to teach or learn certain concepts, or to complete certain tasks. As mentioned earlier, accommodations have

been made where students have been allowed or taught to communicate their learning and understanding using alternative technologies such as augmentative communication devices and systems. These adjustments and accommodations were evident with varying degrees across participants depending on the disabilities of the students they teach and also depending on their understanding of their students' learning profiles.

#### **4.5.3. What methods and tools can be used to enhance AFL practices with learners with CLDD?**

The answers to this question were adequately answered in the teacher perspectives and in the previous two questions, so to answer it would be repetition.

#### **4.6. Summary**

The findings in this chapter overwhelmingly reveal that participants are generally satisfied with the effectiveness of AFL in the teaching and learning of students with CLDD. Even though this is the case, participants have revealed that some hard work needs to be put in place in the way of finding adaptations, adjustments and accommodations in order for AFL to make sense to the students.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the perceptions of special educators on the effectiveness of using assessment for learning with students with CLDD, considering the challenges they face in learning. This investigation was inspired by a critical inquisitiveness about the effectiveness of AFL practices with students with these learners. In my career as an AFL curriculum leader I observed the varied stance taken by different categories of teachers on the effectiveness of this strategy and it got me wondering whether this method was really effective for students with challenging needs and learning profiles. Therefore, the aim of this study was to gain insight into how special educators felt about the implementation of this practice with students with CLDD. This chapter will draw the major conclusions from the findings of the investigation, which were drawn from the literature on this subject, along with the interviews, documents and practice videos which were reviewed.

### **5.1. Summary of the study**

In order to explore special educators perspectives on the effectiveness of the use of AFL on students with co-existing and co-occurring learning disabilities and difficulties a special needs school which was using this strategy was chosen as a site for gathering data. As Carpenter (2010a) asserted, the co-existence and co-occurrence of these disabilities creates complex learning profiles which are challenging for educators because they cut across different pedagogies, meaning educators do not know which one to prioritise. The question was therefore; could AFL be the solution to this dilemma of educating these students with learning profiles that are atypical. Based on the ontological assumption that multiple realities exist, which resulted resulting from the belief that people create and co-create their own personal realities based on their lived experiences, an interpretive qualitative case study was undertaken to try and solve the research problem.

This research paradigm stresses the study of peoples' individual view points and these views shape their actions and influence the decisions they make (Creswell, 2013). Janesick (2003) stated that this design enables the researcher to undertake a holistic search for the participant's meanings, relationships, conceptions and also the understudy of social settings, structures and events over time. In this study I, as the researcher, was able to undertake the above investigation by forming intimate relationships between researcher and participants, since it was insider research and as a researcher, I understood the situational constraints that shaped the knowledge

construction processes of the participants. However, I endeavoured not to jeopardise the validity and accuracy of the data collected by:

- using an abstemious style of interviewing which means that the researcher restrained from passing her own opinions and make self-disclosure.
- using triangulation of data collection and analysis- interviews, and video and document reviews; and also the use of Nvivo data analysis software in conjunction with inductive and deductive analysis strategies.
- involving participants in the transcripts verification process.

Data was connected through interviews, documents review and through the review of audio visual images, provided by the participants themselves. The data was analysed through the assistance of data analysis software (Nvivo) which allowed the coding of all three data sources. The open coded data was clustered and re-organised by the themes, concepts and relationships until axial codes emerged (Newman, 2003). This iterative and interpretative process was carried out until the scheme of classifying and understanding the meaning of the data was coherent (Suter, 2012)

## **5.2. Major conclusions**

### **5.2.1. Variations among teachers' understanding of what AFL is among the participants**

In the interviews participants were asked to describe their understandings of what AFL meant to them. These understandings were grouped into four groups. The first group consisted of those who were quite clear on what AFL was and their understanding was consistent with the definitions supplied in literature, by researchers such as Klenowski (2009), The Assessment Reform group (ARG) (2002) and James and Pedder (2006). These researchers' definitions articulated AFL as a vehicle for prompting, improving and furthering students learning during every day practices. Participants A, C, E, F, and G's understandings correlated the main tenets of the above authors' definitions. Three of these participants were classroom teachers and two were senior managers. Two of the three teachers displayed very high levels of the employment of AFL in their practices and they have embraced the "spirit" of AFL as outlined by Marshall and Drummond (2006 , p.137).

This first group of participants who embraced the spirit of AFL, believed it to be useful in enhancing students' learning. They did not recognise it as a specific assessment tool or method, but as a practice or a design and a way of using assessment information to

improve learning. This is comparable to the assertion of Black and Wiliam (1998) who reported that assessment can only be formative if it is used to improve teaching and learning. This group of participants endeavoured to create new innovative teaching/learning strategies which involved adjusting, adapting and making meaningful accommodations to match the learning profiles of their students so as to make sure that learning is enhanced. They utilised a range of strategies and techniques which were discussed in detail in the previous chapter, such as visual symbols, pixon boards, Makaton sign language, Big Macs and other communication devices and methods. Active involvement of students in their learning was evident in their (participants') practice videos. This practice was harmonious with Black et al. (2006), and Dann (2002) who articulated that students should play more active roles in their learning.

One of the teachers articulated her understanding of AFL very well but was doubtful about whether this practice could be implemented fully with her group of students who have very challenging and profound needs. In her interview she mentioned that it might work when used in conjunction with other pedagogies and strategies. Because of this doubt of the appropriateness of using AFL with her group of learners, she did not display high levels of innovation in order to try and find innovative ways, techniques and strategies of implementing it. She therefore was only using partial employment of AFL even though it was a school wide initiative to try and make AFL practices the culture of the school.

The second group of participants are those who partially knew what AFL is, but missed out on its connection to teaching and learning. In this group, participant D described AFL as a tool to find learning barriers and to give students ownership of their learning. When further questioned participant D could not make the connection with improvement of teaching and learning. On the other hand, participant H clearly explained the AFL process but could not define it. Their concepts of AFL lacked clarity. This raises questions as to whether they understand what it is or whether they are just following a process that was given to them. Both these teachers have moderately high levels of AFL employment in their classrooms which was revealed by the documentation they provided and by the videos that were watched. However, through further follow up investigations, it showed that participant H had really embraced the spirit of AFL and went a long way to adjust and change her practices in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning that occurred in her class, but somehow could not articulate her understanding of it to someone else. On the other hand

participant D followed the “letter” of AFL (Marshall and Drummond, 2006, p. 137), whereby she just followed the simple application of rigid techniques and processes of AFL without embodying the “why” of it. She was very good at following the process but it was done in a superficial way.

The third group included one teacher, participant B, who regarded AFL as tool with which to measure the outcome of set goals. Her perception is performance orientated. Further investigations into this participants practices shows that she even believes that learning is a right for her students but she does not articulate her belief in them as learners. Through reviewing her videos, the evidence was compelling that she did not regard the group of students as learners, because throughout her lessons, she utilised the teacher-aides in her room to answer questions and to act on behalf of the students. This practice does not help the students to be involved in their learning at all, therefore negating the whole purpose of AFL which aims to improve students’ communication, involvement and engagement, reflection and autonomy through the feedback loop. As a result, her students who are profoundly disabled miss out on valuable teaching and learning.

The last group, group four, were those who could not define or describe what AFL was. These were the two teacher aides that were involved in the study. The mostly likely reason for this being that the teacher aides were not involved in the learning community which are called quality learning circles (QLC), discussions, and they were never really given the background training of what AFL is and why it is important as a practice. They were just given professional development on the AFL process so that they could understand it and support their teachers in the classroom. However, on further reflection, the researcher thought that it is paramount that teacher aides also need to understand what AFL was and why they are using it, in order for them to be able to embrace it totally.

From the above analysis, it shows that a deep understanding of what AFL is, why it is important, and how it can be implemented with different learners, goes a long way to improving its employment by teachers in the classroom. The school is engaged in a series of professional development endeavours in order to up-skill teachers in their understanding and employment of AFL. This involves undertaking whole school professional development sessions and forming their own school based communities of learning called ‘Quality Learning Circles’ (QLCs), where teachers meet in small groups to share their classroom experiences, share videos and learn from each other. They

brainstorm how to solve problematic situations being experienced in the classroom and to “reflect on their experiences in systematic ways that build their accessible knowledge base to learn from mistakes” Oldroyd (2006; p.15). This practise is congruent with what Wiliam (2009) asserted that in order to implement AFL successfully, there is a requirement to change teachers’ habits and practises. These quality learning circles in the school provide a regular space, time and structure where teachers can reflect on teaching and practice in a non-threatening environment. They enhance and facilitate sharing of untapped expertise and help build a collective knowledge base to the school. The highlight of these findings therefore, is that it is prevalent that there are a collective base knowledge and a shared understanding with which to work, if AFL is to become the culture of the school and if every teacher in the school is to embrace the spirit of it.

### **5.2.2. Clarity about what is to be learnt**

Carpenter (2010a) claimed that there is a group of students who have complex learning needs who are permeating schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century whose learning profiles do not have learning profiles that fit into the current learning environments, curriculum models, and pedagogies (Morton and McMennamin (2010). This group of learners is challenging even for most people in the education sector because there is no reference to support teachers. As a consequence special needs educators and teachers in general are faced with a mammoth task of trying to find pedagogies which can help overcome the combinations of layered needs which these students have, which include mental health, social, behaviour, communication and cognitive, in order to enable them to access and engage in the learning processes and to actively participate in the classroom and wider community activities (Carpenter, 2010). When learning needs are multi-layered like this, it is difficult for the teachers to decide on which pedagogy to give precedence. In her interview participant G brought to fore this dilemma faced by teachers by saying,

“... it was absolutely difficult with just being so overwhelmed with how you were going to meet the students’ needs who have so many needs.”

Participant F, concurred by saying,

“----it is hard especially with students with very high needs... together with visual impairments, physical impairments and behaviour problems.”

These were the frustrations voiced by the teachers before they started using AFL. Some of the participants did not regard these students as learners before their engagement of AFL as reported by participant C in her interview. She pointed out that,

“... not everybody sees students with CLDD as learners... they often see them as people who need care”.

However after using AFL with these participants began to be clearer on what students needed to learn and what teachers needed to teach,

as per the definition of AFL by Klenowski, (2009) which claims that AFL is every day practices by all parties involved in the learning process, (which are learners, teachers and their peers) that explore and reflect on and use information on ongoing learning activities such as dialogue, demonstrations and observations, learning and achievement is improved. In this definition, the focus is not content related but on how the learning takes place. The ARG (2002) definition also focuses on the learner as the central part of the process and how learning occurs with the help of the teacher. When the participants understood that it was about the students and their learning, they began to shift their practice, through finding ways of involving and engaging the students in the learning process.

Through following the AFL framework provided by Absolum (2009), participants started thinking more deeply on how to share what it is the students were intended to learn and how to involve them in the co-construction of success criteria after clear and focused modelling. The expectations that learning intentions needed to be shared clearly with the students, challenged participants to explore how to share these learning expectations in ways that were understood by learners. In this process, success criteria and learning intentions were articulated by the teacher or co-constructed by both parties. It was clearly demonstrated in reviewing the videos that where teachers involved learners in this process using a range of techniques and strategies that were meaningful to the students, the students became clearer of the expectations and showed evidence of more participation. Co-construction is more effective because it involves the learners and they are able to articulate what they are learning. Unless both teacher and student are clear about the intended learning, the learning process is likely to collapse.

Co-construction of success criteria was usually done after students and teachers had had the opportunity to model and examine exemplars in order to gain clearer understanding of what the expected outcomes looked like. After that, students were exposed to a range of opportunities to try it out through given tasks which they engaged in individually or collaboratively in small groups. During this process, feedback was used to scaffold learners in their learning. As participants engaged in this process, they discovered that

they were clearer about their expectations for learners and what teaching they themselves needed to do. Students also became clear what was expected of them and how they were expected to achieve it, because they were involved. Participants used video evidence to reflect on their practice in order to improve it, so that it is clear, as was clearly discussed in the findings chapter.

More importantly, in a system that had teachers who were overwhelmed and challenged by the depth of the needs of their students, AFL brought clarity, focus and motivation. Participant A affirmed that the use of AFL

“revitalised her teaching’.

Participant F, asserted that AFL has made

“---everything is much clearer – what to teach, the teaching steps and how...”

Participant H contended that she would teach no other way and that AFL helps her to teach clearly through sharing,

“what the students are learning and how”.

The first step, therefore in achieving learning with learners with CLDD is to establish meaningful ways to bring clarity in what they are expected to learn because without this, there is no learning. Clarity about what is to be learnt brings transparency in the learning process which in turn impacts on students learning awareness and skill development. Furthermore, effective teacher scaffolding and feedback which is related to learning and content, will enhance further clarity.

When there is clarity about learning expectations, learners become enthusiastic, motivated and confident in their learning. They begin to set up high expectations for themselves as they feel confident about their own capacity to learn. This was clearly evident in the videos that were reviewed in this study, where it was noted that as students became confident in themselves as learners, their body language changed and even the way they approached tasks became more positive. They began to set their own learning trajectories, as represented through alternative communication systems which were meaningful to them. When students are clear about their learning they become more reflective.

In fact, when students and teachers are clear about the learning intentions and how to go about it, even learners with CLDD will be able to take responsibility of their own

learning in their own unique way. Research shows that when the learning trajectory is clear, learners' motivation, engagement and behaviour improve (Absolum, 2006). The challenges posed to teachers by learners with CLDD, that were narrated at the beginning of this section, should be reduced when there is shared clarity of what is being learnt and about expectations between teachers and learners. Both parties will begin to reflect on how to achieve these learning expectations.

### 5.2.3. Reflective practices

Since Black et al (2006) regarded reflective thinking as the highest aspect of metacognition within the framework of thinking and learning, it was interesting to see how the perceptions of the same participants who were overwhelmed by how to meet the needs of their students had shifted, and had started aiming for higher order skills such as reflective thinking after using AFL. These participants regarded the acquisition of reflection skills and reflective practices as one of the strongest benefits of using AFL. Figure 3 below shows how participants valued the importance of reflective practices in their practices.

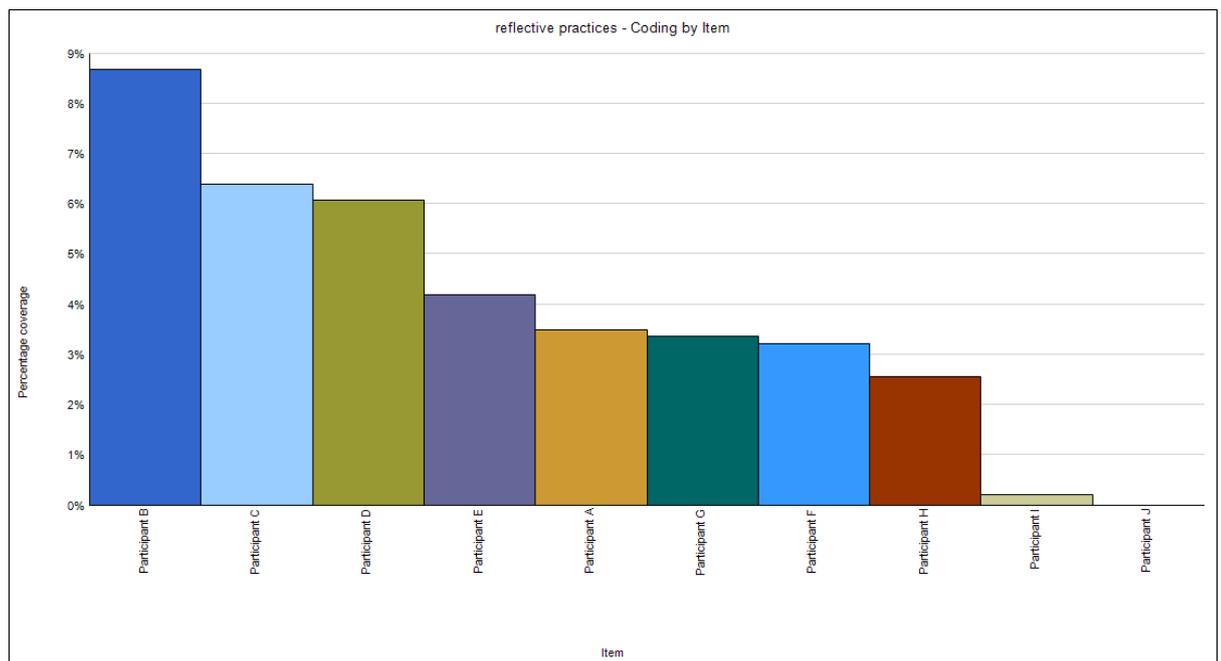


Figure 3 : Percentages of how participants valued and referred to reflective practices

As discovered through evidence in the study, when learners were clear about their learning, they became reflective about the teaching and learning process which in turn strengthened their capacity to learn. Central to this, is the principle of reflection as metacognition where learners become aware of and are able to clarify and describe their thinking. The Ministry of Education (2007) in the NZC maintains that,

“Reflective learners assimilate new learning, relate it to what they already know, adapt it for their own purpose and translate thought into action. Over time they develop their creativity, their ability to think critically about information about ideas and their metacognitive ability” [thinking about their own thinking]. (p.34).

When learners are clear of the intended learning, they routinely reflect on the learning process to determine where to go next. Participants in this study agree that this is not a natural process to students with CLDD, but that a lot of thought preparation and modelling needs to be done before the learners become reflective learners. This also demands that teachers become reflective practitioners who explore meaningful strategies and techniques to use for this unique group of students.

One of the school documents reviewed, “The curriculum plan”, (p.8) states that effective practitioners’ model AFL principles when they allow themselves, and encourage their learners, to reflect on their learning, question and evaluate their own learning progress. To encourage this, video analysis and “open to learning” style feedback with colleagues (Robinson, 2009) were used by teachers in their quality learning circles to collectively reflect on their practices. Teachers then translated these “open to learning conversations” and video analysis techniques to their classroom practices. It was observed that some participants took videos of their lessons and then analysed them with the students. They then used the information to plot their way forward or to discuss areas they needed to improve on.

Participants encouraged reflection in their classes using a range of strategies. Some used visual templates and questions which encouraged reflection. Some used electronic tools and augmentative tools such as Big Mac depending on the needs and ability levels of the students. It was specifically noted that most teachers deliberately taught reflection to their students. Participant C mentioned that giving students time to reflect, gives them “self-worth.” This is because, in the reviewed literature, students with CLDD are dumped in the care stage (Neilson, cited in Fraser, Moltzen & Ryba, 2005p.12), where individuals with disabilities were regarded as “suffering individuals” who needed care and who were incapable of making decisions. Society therefore adopted an attitude of doing things for these individuals and/or to them without giving them the opportunity to make decisions for themselves. These same sentiments were mentioned by the two participants who are senior managers (C and F) at the school. They noticed that some teachers still had that care mentality, rather than regarding learners as equal citizens

who have rights and abilities, they just did things for them, which can be considered rather demeaning. However, when these students are given opportunities and supported (through different strategies and tools) to reflect on their own learning and thinking, it gives them a sense of self-worth and motivation to achieve more.

Participant C reminisced that – “---- many of our students, they have very little control over their own lives because everything is done to them and for them...” and,

Participant F said- “there was a lot of stuff done for the students rather than with the students or alongside them.”

Participant J also asserted that it is important,

- “not doing things for them, but with them- not us or anybody but with them [students]”.

It is therefore important for teachers, that as they help students to reflect, they themselves engage in reflective practices, especially on their attitudes and practices. It was observed throughout the interviews and documents reviewed that participants perceived that the use of AFL strengthened and enhanced their reflective practices. It made them think deeply about how they could meet the needs of their particular group of students in a meaningful way to them [students]. This is highlighted by statements such as these from the participants:

Participant B- “it gives us the opportunity to reflect on our teaching so that we can modify our ways and improve teaching styles”.

Participant C – “I think it is very inquiry based because you are always looking at, did it work; where to from here; what’s the next step. This is very beneficial. Once you get into that way of thinking it helps you to move forward with your planning. It helps you to look at what – if something hasn’t worked –it gives you that critical feedback, that time to self-reflect and say –Ok, it didn’t work, we put our best effort into it and it didn’t work- What else could we do? You know and you are working with the student on that”

Participant D, said “Well, I think it is like teachers are lifelong learners and with this AFL system you know, you are going to reflect back to your own teaching as well all the time. Did I do this, did I do that, and did I do all the things and ask yourself how I can change this or that which I did not achieve so as to

achieve better learning. I think it's – that's why I said it is an ongoing process- a continuous process. Definitely I am sure it will be helping teachers as well in their teaching and what changes they can make to help students learn better.”

Participant E – “It helps us to change our strategies and it makes us think harder- teachers and teacher aides alike because it has actually worked quite well with some of our students.”

In this investigation there has been compelling evidence that it is possible for reflective practices to happen in learners with CLDD, when there is deliberate, careful and thoughtful use of reflection strategies. Teachers need to think deeply on how they can support their students to reflect in their learning, actions and thinking. They also need to provide resources that are meaningful to the students as to support this reflection. Most students with CLDD are visual learners, not perceptual learners; they need visual and tactile tools to use for reflection. As mentioned that over eighty per cent of the students in this school have communications disabilities, they also need tools to use for communicating and presenting their thinking processes such a visual cue cards, communication slips, sign language, big Macs and/or personalised talking key boards. Even if a student is non-verbal, participants in this study have shown that with deep thinking about how to meet the needs of the learners, there is always a way to include them in reflection. This takes time, motivation and skill, so since there is a big push for inclusive education around the world, it would be wise for all teacher training institutes to add this aspect into their programmes.

#### **5.2.4 Engagement, participation, involvement and Autonomy**

##### **5.2.4.1. Students' engagement**

Students are much more engaged in their work if they are involved in setting their own goals and in ascertaining what they are learning about. The AFL process as being practiced in the school does that through the co-construction of success criteria using a range of tools that are familiar to the students such as picture, symbols, sign language, Big-Mac switches, electronic devices and verbal communication. After self and peer assessment, and active reflection students are also involved in the process of setting their own goals. Students become more perceptive and reflective about what is expected of them, and endeavour to achieve it. They become more attuned to their work so it becomes routine and they readily engage with whatever task they are given. This is reflected in the reviewed documents and participant interviews as shown below;

Curriculum plan (p.9) stated that “students are helped to participate in the learning and the assessment process and then supported to see the link between assessment information and their goal setting.”

Participant A asserted that as students engage with the AFL process, they get “more involved in their own learning... they become keen to know where they are, what they need to know and learn, and how that can be achieved... they get to see for themselves what it they are doing is.”

Participant C believes that it is motivating and engaging when “you involve learners with disabilities in their learning... and when you also involve them in choosing their next step, it just demonstrates that you respect them and believe in them.”

Participant D stated that, “--- participation and involvement is important because while sharing learning intentions and co-constructing success criteria, you do want each child to participate and interact with you and their peers and this engages them and gives them ownership of their learning. There have been times, I remember when students have initiated and directed their own learning because of this.”

Participant H – “they are quite interested in their learning and they want to participate, they are active participants because they are getting so involved in their learning. They get the opportunity to give their opinions and to set their own goals.”

As mentioned above students become more engaged when they have criteria they have to follow which they understand and to which they have contributed in constructing. It makes the learning step much clearer and they can monitor their own journey towards the accomplishment of their goals. This in turn makes them more engaged and involved because they know what is expected of them and they can follow it through.

Engagement, involvement and reflection results in high quality of work being produced by the students, that is, why participants in this project valued its benefits in their students’ learning.

Figure 4 below shows that teachers and teacher aides who directly worked with students appreciate the value of involvement. Involvement in this study had sub-themes such as participation and collaboration.

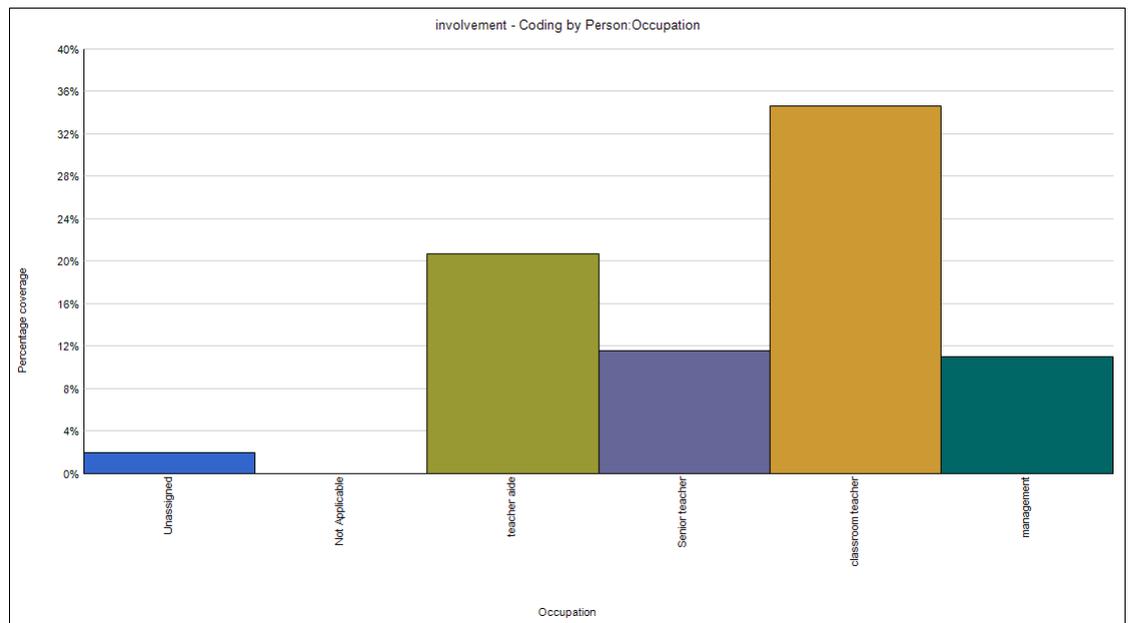


Figure 4: Involvement of Groups

Involving the students in decision making in Individual Education Plans success criteria, next steps and about how their learning progressed, gave students and teachers more confidence and empowerment in the teaching/learning process. Most teachers discarded their perceptions of regarding AFL as a form assessment tool, and moved to adding it to the repertoire of instructional strategies.

Participant G claimed that she was- “--- so motivated, it’s unreal because I see success with my students, I feel a sense of success and achievement too... therefore I feel more confident and happier having this strategy in my kitty.”

Participant C- “going back to the last comment, probably my own strategies have improved since I have realised how difficult it is to use AFL just as an assessment tool. I think I have made it an instructional strategy too”.

However there are still some participants who are still taking AFL as an assessment tool and divorcing it from their instructional strategies. When asked to describe AFL, participant B said,

“--it was a measuring tool... to measure the goals and whatever has been planned.”

The documents and videos which she provided for review also showed evidence of this belief she holds. This shows that there is still need for further professional development so that every teacher in the school understands and practices AFL for what it is, an instructional strategy.

During the interviews, participants discussed how their practice had shifted since engaging in this project. They reflected on how the New Zealand Curriculum provided them with what to teach and how AFL has allowed them to adjust their practice to meet students varied needs and learning profiles through curriculum calibration and pedagogical reconciliation (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter, etal, 2012). So when schools with students with CLDD, look at the national curriculum, they need to be able to look at the learning profiles of these students and calibrate it to suit the needs of their students through reconciling different pedagogies which cater for the layered needs of these learners. It is not just enough to use the national curriculum with these students because it will not engage them at all, it is no wonder that Morton and McMennamin stated that most teachers in regular schools are struggling to see the relevance of the curriculum to students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities.

#### **5.2.4.2. Participation and involvement**

Participation in the class has many advantages for learners. When students are actively involved in their learning they are more likely to understand the material being taught (Ramisden, 2002). The knock on effect of it is that the learner's attitudes and motivation are positively impacted and they are more likely to show initiative and responsibility for their own learning (McKeachie, 2002). For students with CLDD, sometimes words from teachers do not mean much. However when words are integrated with practical hands on involvement and participation on the part of the student, things become clearer to them.

According to Porter, Robertson and Hayhoe ( 2000) learners need to be afforded opportunities to be involved in making decisions in subject based and other learning activities. In this investigation it was revealed that when students are involved in the learning process and contribute to the assessment and goal setting process, they participate willingly toward their achievement. In this school, students are involved in the formation of their Individual Education Plan goals, in co-construction of success criteria and in monitoring their own progress through self and peer assessment. They also set their own learning goals and next steps with the support of their teachers and teacher aides. This involvement motivated students to learn and achieve more.

In this investigation, participants assert that as the AFL processes (Absolum, 2006) are becoming more established in their classrooms, students are getting more engaged and involved in their learning. This is congruent with Black et al (2006)'s assertions that when a "social and community discourse" (learning focused relationship) is established,

then involvement and participation become everyday practice. For learners with CLDD, teachers need to use alternative forms of communication because most of these learners cannot function meaningfully, using traditional verbal language. Therefore individualised approaches together with new innovative assessment and communication tools and a variety of ways for teacher/student interaction need to be explored and implemented as shown by some of the participants in this study. If the education sector really needs to successfully integrate learners with CLDD and improve their lives, a lot of input needs to be invested in exploring ways of increasing their involvement and participation through using AFL in an innovative way.

#### **5.2.4.3 Autonomy**

In this investigation it was discovered that the interrelationship between AFL and autonomy was mediated through the teacher student relationship (learner focused relationship). This relationship is a potentially influential factor in the way AFL practices are enacted in classrooms of learners with CLDD (Willis, 2011). In analysing the interviews and the videos provided by the participants, it was clear that teacher/student relationship was one of the significant ways that beliefs about students as learners was mediated and this identity was socially constructed in the classroom. It revealed how teachers reviewed themselves in relation to the students and to the process of learning. It also influenced how their communication and learning activities positioned the student in terms of expected roles and identity (Willis,2011), hence the varied ways of communication mentioned in the findings chapter which were being engaged by different participants with their different learners.

On the other hand, it goes a long way to explain the anomaly found between the two co-teachers who taught the same group of students and yet their belief and practices were so contrary. Participant E partially embraces the spirit of AFL and glimpses were observed in her interaction with the students in the videos. However, because she was not confident in her own practices, she doubted herself therefore, she seemed to be overshadowed by her co-teacher who was a team leader in AFL, and who misinterpreted AFL practices with student with CLDD. Although participant E teaches the most challenging group of students, she endeavoured to search for strategies which could engage and involve the students. She used a lot of hands on tactile tools to stimulate students with multiple disabilities which included severe visual impairments. She also utilised a range of communication tools to try and communicate with the students and watched their body language for responses. By doing so, she had strong relationships

with her students and they responded to her in their own way. In her videos, it was novel to observe these students use their senses, for example, sense of touch, eye pointing and, or even try to use their limbs for those who have minimum function of limbs. Even though these students may never reach a point of total autonomy they can experience greater incidences of independence. Contrary, to her positive endeavours, her co-teacher used teacher aides to respond, instead of students. This action reveals her negative perception of students and learners.

In light of the above, Willis (2011) contended that although teachers might, with all good intentions, use pedagogy and curriculum to try and bring autonomy, it will not materialise if they do not change their traditions and routines of assessment. AFL goes a long way to shift power, from the teacher to the learner, so that the student is empowered to take responsibility for their own learning. Particularly, in some classroom practices, especially those with students with behaviour problems, when the teacher tries to regulate or control activities within the classroom, they often work against their intention of empowering learners (Mcfadden and Munns,2002). This is so prevalent in classes with students with CLDD, because as mentioned earlier in this thesis, the co-occurrence of disabilities challenge teachers about which pedagogy to prioritise. When students' needs are not being met, they can resort to what teachers call bad behaviour, yet it is a cry to communicate their needs. In this scenario most teachers, go into the control mode to try and manage the situation. For the sake of empowering the students, if teachers engage AFL practices of sharing with the student what the problem is and co-constructing ways of overcoming it, and then self-assess progress throughout the learning process, it goes a long way to give these learners some form of autonomy.

Therefore if autonomy is to be achieved in these circumstances, there is need for a shift in teacher assessment practices and their beliefs about how these students learn. The beliefs that special educators hold, as well as the assessment practices they choose, shape the beliefs that the learners with CLDD (who are regarded by society as non-achievers already) hold about their own capabilities to achieve autonomy. James (2006) points out that different beliefs about how students learn have implications for AFL practices and the outcome of learner autonomy. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the fact that most participants in this study hold the belief that students with CLDD are capable learners, goes a long way to help learners achieve learner autonomy. It will be a matter of exploring ways of making it happen. Although some of these learners may

never achieve autonomy, helping them to experience greater incidences of autonomy will help improve their lives.

People and students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities have come a long way to be regarded as equal citizens with those who live without disability. The shift from the medical, charity and lay discourses to the rights discourse (Fraser, Moltzen, Ryba, 2005) shows the shift of people's beliefs and attitudes about disability. However, society and education still have a long way to go until such a time when the world's attitudes about people and learners with disabilities totally shift from a focus of regarding them as those who need care to a focus of finding a way of making them autonomous and equal citizens. Policy makers are endeavouring to put policies in place, but it is the power and ability to see that these policies are implemented that is lagging behind. This attitude change starts in the education sector, with teachers instilling in learner's skills that lead them to become autonomous.

AFL practices and processes of engaging and involving students in co-constructing learning intentions, success criteria, then self and peer assessing learning in order to monitor their own progress, to actively reflect on their own learning and to formulate their next steps are paramount to the achievement of autonomy. Although support and persistence is needed with these learners, there is evidence that some of these learners can achieve autonomy in some areas of their lives and/ or experience greater incidences of autonomy in others. No person wants to watch their life go by while depending of others to do things for them. This was evidenced in the videos reviewed in this investigation. It was priceless to see how the faces of some of those students brightened up the first time they performed a skill or task independently. There is an inherent desire to achieve and be autonomous in every human being.

#### **5.2.4.4. Communication**

One aspect which was partially raised in the literature review but came up very strongly in this investigation was communication. Communication is the backbone which holds AFL practices together. Central to communication is feedback. The challenge for the participants in this study was that more than eighty per cent of the learners in this school have communication difficulties; so implementing AFL was a huge mountain to climb. During assessment for learning students learn how to guide their own learning through stating what they are learning by, being involved in setting goals and using success criteria, giving themselves and others feedback for learning, (self- and peer assessment),

setting goals (next step), collecting evidence and communicating that evidence to others. All this requires students to be able to communicate clearly.

Black and Williams (1998) and Sternberg (1996) both corroborate that when learners communicate with others about their learning, they learn about what they have learnt, what they need to learn and what support they might need. When students are involved in assessment for learning, they learn to articulate where they are at with their learning, what they have learnt and what they might still need to learn, which will then improve their achievement because they take responsibility and learn to regulate their learning. It is paramount that students be able to communicate their learning to others because in doing so, they will receive feedback, which is important in their learning.

Furthermore, when learners communicate their learning to others using a range of work samples, activities and tasks, they go beyond scores and grades, but are able to explore the depth, detail and the range of their own learning to figure out their strengths and what they need to work on next (Gregory, Cameron, & Davies, 1997). This process enables learners to self-monitor their learning which leads to autonomy and lifelong learning. For this reason, participants in this study felt that communication is an important part of AFL especially with students with CLDD who already have difficulties in that area. However the good news is that when these participants took the risk of implementing AFL with those students by exploring and establishing communication systems which were meaningful to their particular learners, they discovered that their students' communication improved. This was conveyed through the following clips from the participant's interviews.

Participant I pointed out that their students in a new entrant class are "... talking more... and are communicating better with visual cue cards". She added that they are even communicating at home about what they have learnt and the parents come to school the following day excited about this.

Participant A reported that AFL has "given them [students] a voice and the confidence to use their voice instead of them being told what to do... but for them to say what they think and what they are learning."

She also went on to explain how this communication happens in her class when she pointed out that,

“---you may need to be using different tools for communication so that there is two-way communication which is teacher/ student, and student/ teacher. Whether that be PECs (picture exchange communication) type thing, Makaton sign language type thing, or augmentative communication devices... you’ve got to make sure you are capturing the students’ voice and not your own interpretation. Things like videos, voice recorders and photographs are all important”.

Participant B who has profoundly disabled non-verbal students also reported that she uses the students strength to establish communication systems so that when she asks them something,

“---they will respond by either a smile or a head movement, or eye movements, or some sort of facial expression or body language will tell me that they have acquired something or that thinking is taking place.”

Participant F asserted that AFL has made great improvement in the students’ communication when she said,

“—whereas, they were passive learners, I think they are now confident to talk to their teacher about their learning and to each other too... AFL has helped enhance their communication skills.”

Although her students have a range of communication needs, participant G mentioned that

“I use a whole range of concrete materials for them to manipulate and communication systems to help them understand and communicate their learning to me and others.”

Davies (2001) encouraged teachers to “involve their students in communication in different ways because this activity supports learning in the short term by increasing the feedback they receive, and in the long run by giving them practice presenting themselves as learners.” (p.2). this practice helps students to find their own learning and reflect on it, instead of waiting for teachers to find the evidence of learning and then judge their work. When students gain the skill of communicating their own learning, it broadens the feedback loop which is the vehicle for learning in AFL.

### **5.3. Negative perceptions**

Although most of the findings discussed in this chapter were positive and showed AFL as an effective strategy to use with learners with CLDD, there is still the old age question, “Is it suitable for everyone?” Participant E who brought out 20 out of the 25 negative nodes might have a point, in that it is not all smooth sailing. There are some students who are too profoundly disabled with co-occurring disabilities such as physical, mental, vision and behavioural disabilities all packaged in one. These learners are really challenging to cater for and it calls for practitioners to dig deep in their creativity in order to find ways and adapting and adjusting learning content pedagogies and strategies in order to cater for their needs. It requires teachers to be very innovative, creative and committed to investigating ways that work, because these learners have a cluster of disabilities which make their learning profiles very blurred and complicated to figure out which pedagogies to use.

For this reason, it was found out that the attitudinal perceptions depended on the students taught as shown in figure 5 below. Those teachers who taught students who were profoundly disabled displayed more negative attitudes towards the effectiveness of AFL because it required them to exert a huge amount of effort and creativity to come up with strategies that enhanced the learning of these students. Whereas, those who taught more able students could easily find a range of strategies that suited their students, hence they displayed more positive attitudes than negative.

Most of these students with profound disabilities, coupled with severe medical conditions, are mostly sleepy or drowsy because of the medications they take, or they may be chronically irritable or anxious, leaving people around them scared to interact with them for fear of unsettling them. As participant E asserted in her interview that although most of the students in her class have brief cyclical periods of alertness, they are not able to maintain it long enough for meaningful instructional activities to happen. This is because they spend most of their energies trying to deal with internal factors related to their disabilities or health setbacks. The mandate for their teachers is therefore, to try and develop in them the ability to maintain this alertness stage for longer periods. Carpenter (2010) and Carpenter et al (2012) are working hard trying to develop some engagement profiles for these learners which help these students to attend for longer in order for them to engage in some form of learning.

Innovative teaching techniques and strategies which stimulate these students' basic sensory perceptual and cognitive abilities need to be utilised in their instruction. These include alternative communication systems which were mentioned in the findings chapter such as objects of reference (for example, a spoon to indicate meal time), sign language, picture exchange communication system (PECS) and electronic communication devices.

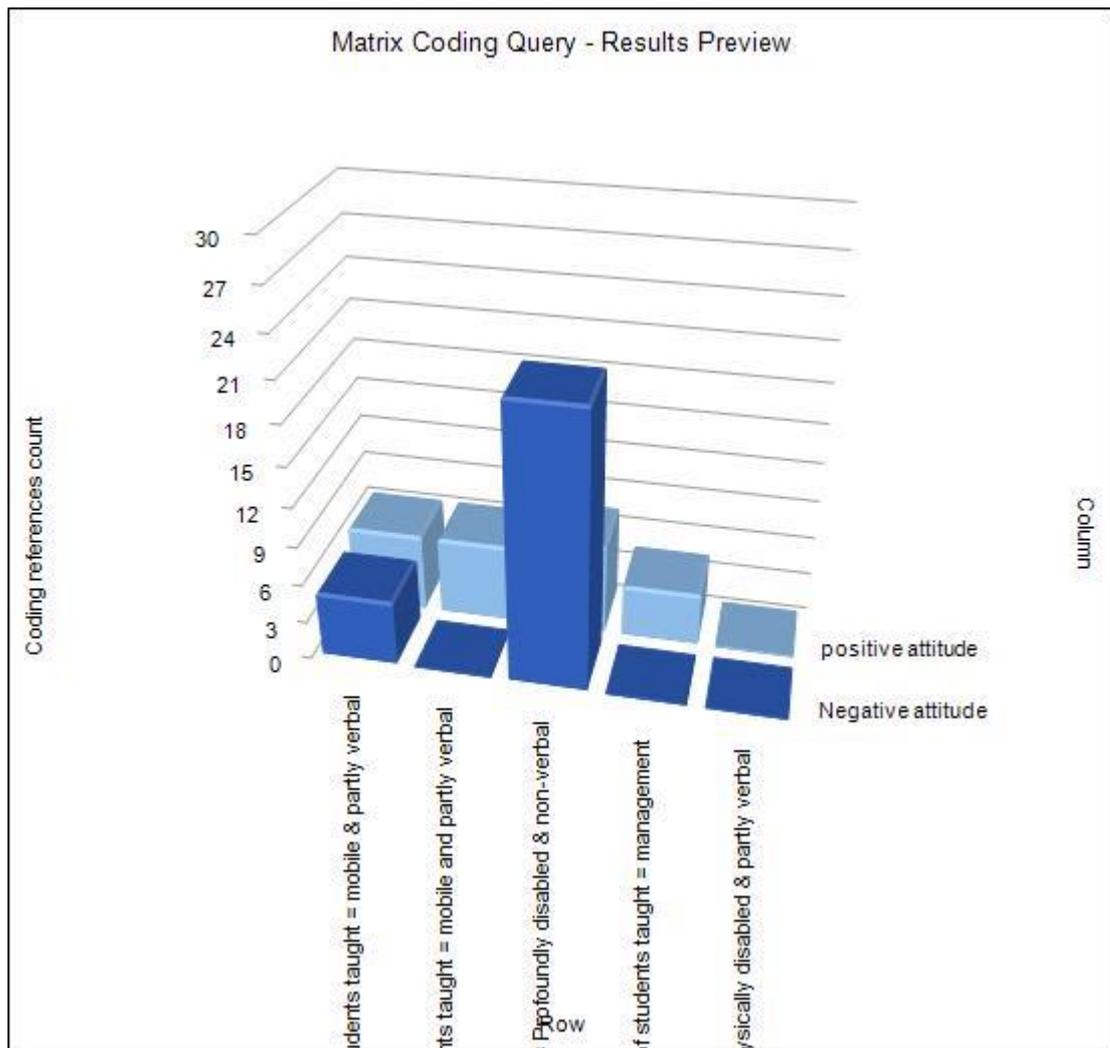


Figure 5: Relationship between attitudes and types of students taught

These students also require accommodations in their learning time in order to provide for their non-attention, sleeping time, feeding and self-care time. Teachers who work with these students cater for a whole lot of needs over and above their teaching requirements, so they need to have in-depth professional development on the shifting and multi-layered needs of these students. So is it appropriate to use AFL with these students? Is it not adding to the work load of these teachers?

As participant E and C described in their interview, it is possible to use AFL in conjunction with other pedagogies in order to try and meet the needs of these learners. Participant E stated that with the help of team-mates and team leaders she has

“---improved some of the strategies and techniques in the room. I began to think of some strategies I might have not thought of if I did not have support”.

She is showing some innovation and trying to explore methods that work when she says

“ I believe in compromise, and you just use a little from here and from there, using what best works for the student, like what we are doing with their engagement profiles... trying to find ways... that stimulate and engage the child, to help them learn”.

She therefore asserted that is AFL was used in conjunction with those profiles, it might work. Her concern, however, was that it takes a lot of time. She was also stuck in the perception of AFL as an assessment tool, wondering how she can use it to assess the learning of students. As she is being supported by colleagues, her perceptions are gradually shifting and she is beginning to embrace AFL as teaching/learning strategy.

These confused perceptions are the ones that hinder most teachers from making the effort with these profoundly disabled learners. Teachers who teach these students need constant professional development and it may be helpful for them to do some action research on how these learners learn. Participant E therefore brought out some valid concerns on the use of AFL with these learners, which highlight the concerns of regular mainstream teachers who find themselves with some of those learners in their classrooms, without any training which causes a big dilemma for them and for management. Also with national standards coming into play, teachers feel they have an impossible task on their hands to be able to get these learners to achieve to their level of standards. Policy makers have a job to make these considerations which are informed by research.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

This study has revealed that AFL is effective for learners with CLDD. Participants in this research perceive that the introduction of AFL in their school has helped improve the learning and achievements of their students as well as their own practices and attitudes. Whereas, some of them were doubtful about the capability of students to learn, their perceptions have since shifted and they are firm believers that they can learn.

They also believe that the use of AFL has brought clarity to them about what they are teaching and what they expect students to learn. This in turn has helped them to be able to find ways of sharing these expectations with their students, allowing students to be clear about their learning. With improved clarity, both students and teachers have become reflective practitioners who reflect on their learning and teaching in order to improve it. In addition, it was discovered that by using AFL the communication of these learners with CLDD was greatly improved, be it verbal or non-verbal. With improved communication, learners have become more engaged and involved and they participate more in their learning. With greater involvement and participation, students are becoming more and more autonomous. However, there are still some concerns about how to totally use AFL to harness the learning and engagement of those learners who are profoundly disabled with CLDD.

## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This final chapter begins by reminiscing on the inspiration and purposes of this study and how the investigation has evolved up to this point. The research questions are addressed in trying to conclude the findings and the features that were found to facilitate the effectiveness of AFL are summarised. Finally, implications, limitations and recommendations for practice and further research are made.

### **6.1- Reflection on the inspiration and purposes of the study**

The inspiration that triggered this investigation came from a critical inquisitiveness about the effectiveness of AFL practices in students with CLDD. The effectiveness of AFL in regular mainstream students is well researched and documented. However, there is very little research in its effectiveness in students who have complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Three years ago, I was chosen to attend an in depth training in leadership and assessment. I was thrilled and motivated because I really wanted to learn more on different kinds of assessments out there. During our first session, we were told that we were going to be doing AFL, my heart just dropped and I leaned to my colleague and said, “waste of time, this doesn’t work with our students.”

. As mentioned earlier , these learners challenge professionals because they do not fit into current pedagogies and learning environments (Department for Education, 2011). As I reflected more on this dilemma that was facing me of implementing AFL with these students, inspiration hit me of how I can make accommodations and try it. I became excited and started trialling it with my students. However, at the same time I was supposed to introduce it to my colleagues and it proved to be a hard task because of differing perspectives about its effectiveness. This triggered my motivation to embark on this research.

After carrying out an interpretive qualitative case study, five features thought to facilitate the effectiveness of AFL emerged that have implications for teachers, school administrators, assessment policy developers and researchers. Firstly, there was need for a shift in teacher attitudes and beliefs on the capabilities of these students as learners. In the study it was found out that those participants who moved from the care/charity discourse of disability and embraced the citizenship/ right discourse, readily regarded these students as capable learners (Neilson, as cited in Fraser, Moltzen and Ryba, 2005). They were motivated to explore ways of enhancing this learning. This conclusion has implications for policy makers, in that as much as we want to be a part of the global drive for inclusion; they need to make sure that foundational work is put in place to

change attitudes and perceptions of teachers towards disability. This can be done by beginning to change teacher education policies to include special education training in its modules so that every teacher who qualifies has an idea of how to teach this group of students. It also impacts on assessment policy makers in that they need to take cognisance of the way these learners learn and to make exceptions on how they are assessed without compromising on the content.

Secondly, teachers who were effective in their use of assessment for learning embraced that “spirit” of AFL (Marshall, and Drummond, 2006) and used it to adjust and inform their practices. They rigorously explored ways of meeting students’ needs especially those that enhanced communication, engagement, involvement, participation and autonomy. These teachers actively calibrated their school and class curriculums in order to personalise learning experiences, by sharing and negotiating them with the students and their families. They also engaged in the process of pedagogical reconciliation where they adapted and adjusted their own teaching approaches and strategies through the processes of AFL which enhanced communication, engagement, involvement, participation and autonomy (Carpenter et al, 2012). Pedagogical reconciliation allows teachers to then be able to explore and develop new and innovative teaching tools and strategies. This involves adapting, adjusting and making meaningful and appropriate accommodations which allow students to understand and be able to demonstrate their understanding and learning without fundamentally changing the content being taught.

Thirdly, teaching learners with complex learning needs can be a challenging and sometimes lonely job, so it is was discovered that constant collaborative reflection using open-to-learning conversations in the school communities of learning (QLCs) helped teachers to reflect on and discuss their practices with critical audiences in a non-threatening environment. This process helped give teachers insights from their colleagues and confidence in knowing that they are not alone, but can get support. This support is paramount in that it challenges teachers to take risks in exploring strategies they would not think about on their own. A huge shift was noticed from when this investigation started to when it finished. Even those participants, who were not very persuaded, were beginning to show signs of enthusiasm because they were seeing the benefits of this method to students’ learning and engagement.

Another feature that the participant’s thought helped to facilitate the effectiveness of AFL was that of constant professional development from lead teachers and outside facilitators. The school managed to secure Ministry of Education funding for this

subject, so teachers regularly participated in professional development which constantly challenged their practices and informing them of current practices and pedagogies. This means that if teachers are to embrace an innovation or a shift in practice, school administrators need to play their part in making sure they secure and plan for meaningful professional development.

Lastly, the school made it clear in its policy documents that their goal was to make AFL practices part of the culture of the school. This was clearly articulated to all teachers and appropriate support planned which included one-to-one lesson observations and support with lead teachers, collaborative reflection sessions as individuals and in quality learning circles and regular professional development. This strategy seems to be working in this school, in that even some of the critics of the effectiveness of AFL are beginning to warm up to it as they see its success in other classes. With continuous collaboration, it is anticipated that all teachers will be persuaded and motivated to fully employ AFL in their classes. This requires the school administrators to keep finding innovative ways of engaging teachers and motivating them in this journey.

## **6.2 Implications of the findings**

Research questions for this study were designed to understand whether AFL practices were effective with students with CLDD within the broader classroom context.

### **6.2.1 Research question 1.**

*What do special needs educators think about the effectiveness of AFL in students with CLDD?*

It was the perception of most participants in this study that AFL was the best strategy to assist learning, engagement, participation, involvement and autonomy in students with complex disabilities. AFL was found to be a strategy that can be linked to everything that students did, in school and everyday life, and to every resource they used while engaging in a learning partnership with their teachers, peers and families. This was evidenced by how AFL practices were enacted in classrooms and how they were linked to IEP goals which were sent home for parents to also work on with their children. The IEP process was linked to the AFL process and success criteria was co-constructed by educators, students and their parents. This made it easier for students' goals and needs to be met and learning monitored both at school and at home.

Subsequently, AFL became a matter of design and usage. It did not refer to any one mode of assessment but was believed to be used formatively in whatever teaching and learning process. AFL practices such as goal setting and collaboratively determining models of quality made the evidence of learning visible to teachers, learners and parents. Practices such as dialogue with peers and teachers (learning focused relationships) helped students to be able to communicate their learning and understanding. AFL processes such as the use of success criteria, questioning, self-and-peer-assessment, teacher and peer-modelling were used to evaluate progress and quality. The key was not on the type, abilities or level of the students, but on how AFL was designed and integrated into every teaching and learning activities that was undertaken with the students in a range of environments and situations. With this type of practice learners were able to take ownership of their own learning and build better relationships with other people. With ownership, students became more confident in their own capabilities and hence became better decision makers and problem solvers, which gave them a level of control and autonomy in their lives.

It was therefore concluded from the evidence presented in this study that AFL is an effective tool to use with learners with CLDD, which engages them and makes them constructors of their own destinies.

### **6.2.2. Question 2 and 3**

*Can these students access AFL like any other learner? If not, what needs to be done?*

*What methods and tools can be used to enhance AFL practices with learners with CLDD?*

The evidence in the study revealed that eighty per cent of the participants agreed that in order for learners with CLDD to access AFL, adaptations, adjustments and accommodations were required, if these students were to access and navigate through the process meaningfully. The biggest barrier hindering these learners from participating in life and in learning was lack of language understanding, and inability to communicate their thoughts, intentions, understanding and feelings. There was, therefore, a real need for adaptations, modifications and accommodations to be made, that allowed them to access language, understand it, and use it effectively. Since it has been already established that communication undergirds AFL and is a paramount aspect of the learning process, the adaptations and accommodations were needed in order to give and receive feedback.

A fair amount of time was spent by the successful teachers in exploring methods and tools they could use to enhance communication skills in the students. The majority of teachers in the school used visual symbols and sign language to share learning intentions and to support co-construction of success criteria, self-and-peer-assessment and reflection. Although visual symbols were mainly targeted for students that have autism, it was found out that they also benefited the rest of the learners even those who were non-verbal. The picture exchange communication system was another strategy which was heavily used in the school. These helped students to self-initiate functional communication skills and to increase social communicative behaviours; all which are necessary with AFL. Other augmentative devices such as Big Macks, communication boards, pixon boards and electronic tools were used to enhance and encourage communication.

Other accommodations which needed to be done in terms of communication was the ability to give students enough thinking and responding time. Learners with CLDD process visual and auditory information slowly, so they needed to be afforded time to process information and then formulate their answers without being rushed. With this in mind, maybe longer timetable periods were needed to accommodate thinking and processing time.

A small percentage of learners in this school have cortical blindness and / or suffer from a range of vision related problems. Adaptations and accommodations are also required for those students and these included tactile objects, augmentative devices such as Big Macks, touch screens with pre-loaded messages and sounds, and talking keyboards. Students who had limited use of their limbs were supported to press the switches and touch the screens. For students with vision problems, clear instructions and feedback, was required in order for them to be able to access and benefit from AFL process.

The last set of adaptations and modifications which were done were on teaching strategies. This included curriculum calibration as mentioned earlier. The national curriculum is a broad guideline of the national requirements. The school therefore had to adjust the curriculum in order to align it to the needs and learning profiles of their students. This was further broken down at classroom level where personalised learning activities and experiences were explored, negotiated and shared with learners and their families. It was motivating because it made the learning process explicit and meaningful to them. As mentioned above, teachers had to find new and innovative ways of engaging and involving the students in their learning. These involved them making all

the adaptations, adjustments and modifications mentioned above in order for students to participate fully with understanding in their learning through the AFL process.

The accumulative evidence explored in this study highlighted that participants were generally satisfied with the effectiveness of AFL with learners with CLDD. This was made possible through the intensive professional development they have gone through, collaborative reflections they continue to do and the sheer hard work and motivation of the participants. All these findings have implications for practice and research.

### **6.3. Significance of Study**

The findings of this investigation have significant implications for theory and make a huge contribution to the understanding of the use of AFL with learners with CLDD since there was not much research in the field. This research justifies that AFL can be a collaborative participatory practice that invites learners, even those with complex needs, to negotiate their identities, and take control of their own lives in order to shape their destinies. This is very important in understanding how to help these learners who are marginalised by people's attitudes and beliefs of disability, assessment and learning, to become more involved and autonomous in the classroom, school community and wider society.

This study contributes important insights into understanding why there has been resistance for total inclusion of learners with CLDD in the regular schools. AFL practices require positive teacher-student relationships which are an important factor in establishing a sense of belonging in students. It is doubly harder to achieve this with students whose identities have already been shattered by social attitudes and beliefs. The large numbers of students in each class do not afford teachers enough time to create and maintain these relationships because it takes time away from other students who learn faster and form social relationships naturally, whereas learners with CLDD have to be taught. Positive teacher-student relationships are also required as a motivating factor for students to be active participants, within their own classroom as well as the wider environment, which enhances lifelong learning.

When students feel valued and their needs are met, they get a sense of belonging and they therefore become active participants. This is contrary to what happens in regular classrooms with learners with CLDD. The teachers have their hands so full that they find it difficult to explore innovative strategies to meet the needs of one student at the expense of twenty to twenty-five others. Throughout this study, it was highlighted that

learning happens when students appropriate the language to communicate their understanding, learning, expectations and feelings. AFL is a way of making explicit these communications and expectations. Therefore, recognising and describing how students and teachers negotiated and valued the different ways of learning through engaging with the AFL process is a valuable contribution to understanding the complexities of learning for learners with CLDD, which in turn affects total inclusion.

Another significance of this study is that it contributes to the recognition that practice and meaning making is highly situated and therefore, building teacher capacity takes time. As mentioned by participant C in the study, building positive teacher-learner relationships is a significant and emotional investment which helps marginalised students to negotiate their identities as capable learners and valued members of society. The dilemmas of using AFL with learners with CLDD, includes learning a new language for teachers and students to describe their learning and assessment. Rather than using the deficit model that most teachers use of apportioning blame to teachers, learners or the system, this investigation was an appreciative inquiry ( Willis, 2009), that sought to understand the complexities of AFL in practice with this group of students. In their investigation of the connection between AFL and learner autonomy, Marshall and Drummond (2006) concluded that only twenty per cent of AFL lessons they observed embodied the “spirit of AFL. This study contributed some insights that help to describe the spirit of AFL and make this knowledge available to the eighty percent who are still figuring out their trajectory of AFL practice with learners with CLDD.

Finally, to policy makers, school administrators and education officials who are introducing AFL and other assessment policies, the findings of this research help in understanding the complexities and demands on teacher time, expertise and capacity when employing AFL with students with CLDD. The understanding that AFL is more than a list of instrumental practices, but a negotiation in practice has significance for assessment policy (Willis, 2009).

#### **6.4. Implications for practice.**

Teaching learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities is a complex, challenging but rewarding experience, if teachers get it right. When learning is seen as a process of engagement, involvement and development of autonomous lifelong learning, educators need the ability to understand and support learners make meaning through

their participation in the learning process; especially for those learners who have been marginalised all their lives through societal attitudes. Finding ways of helping students to harness the belief in their own capabilities as learners becomes part of the teachers work. AFL practices, positive learning focused relationships between teachers and students in conjunctions with relevant pedagogies which cater for learners' complex needs, can encourage learners to work towards involvement, participation and autonomy.

Most teachers who were educated using the traditional teacher centred systems may have experienced different power systems, where all the power was in the hands of the teacher. It takes time to appreciate changes on long held beliefs about learning and ownership of power, especially in learning environments where the students are less responsive than those with CLDD. It needs the teacher to be deliberate about shifting power and learning responsibility into the hands of the students. Teachers need to be supported in making this shift and developing their capacity to make changes in their classroom practice so that their students can experience the joy of participative, autonomous learning. Engaging in AFL practices is a good way to make these changes because the process demands power and ownership to be shifted into the hands of the students.

AFL practices need to be defined and discussed with teachers so that there is a shared understanding in any given institution. When teachers are clear, they can be encouraged to articulate their expectations of engaged and autonomous learners, and identify for themselves ways in which they can enhance and assess it. AFL processes are a good way of giving learners with CLDD practice in safe non-judgmental environments, using tools and strategies which are meaningful to them. Teachers who are using AFL with students with CLDD may need to reflect on the kinds of tools required to engage and involve students in their learning and how to use them to meet their needs. There is also the need to negotiate the kinds of understandings about how these learners learn and how learning is understood in the school context and the social context, and then give learners a supportive environment and appropriate tools which help minimise the social risk of being labelled.

Learning focused relationships need to be valued as an integral part of using AFL with learners with CLDD. Without the relationship of trust, learners might resist engagement and participation, opting to take their usual passive role which society and families might have bestowed on them, in the care discourse. Teachers need to be conscious of

how to build these social relationships by using appropriate tools and strategies, humour, fun and modelling without demeaning the learners.

For learners with CLDD, engagement, participation and autonomy in learning activities includes making tacit expectations more explicit by demonstrating quality through feedback, shared success criteria and self-and-peer-assessment. AFL practices can therefore provide opportunities for engagement and involvement through participation in learning activities. Teachers also need to be aware of how their language, attitudes and beliefs can impute an identity that reflects lack of competence in the student and how organisational routines can deprive or give students space to be autonomous learners and initiators of their learning, as well as constructors of their own destinies. This may mean shifting the power dynamics in the classroom by teaching and giving learners responsibility and choice to use innovative tools and being able to make supported decisions on their own learning trajectories. To succeed in doing this, teachers need to consciously plan these changes into their practice, including ways to support students developing these skills and expectations through cognitive and social scaffolding (Willis, 2009). In acquiring these shared norms of using AFL with students with CLDD, there is need for teachers to be patient with learners and with themselves and be able to allow time for negotiating these new practices within old expectations and traditions.

Using AFL practices in conjunction with other relevant pedagogies with learners with CLDD, is powerful pedagogical practices that help these learners who struggle with generalising knowledge to connect their classroom learning work with the wider environment through guided participation in safe learning focussed relationships. AFL is classroom based assessment practice that is focused on connecting past learning experiences with future learning trajectories (Willis, 2011). It is a set of learning oriented practices that can shape how learners can take ownership and responsibility of their own meaning making as individuals and as a community.

It is important for special educators to know that AFL is not an “easy fix” practice that automatically improves student learning. There are a lot of misunderstandings of how AFL principles are translated into classroom practice (The Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning, 2009, March), but teachers must not lose sight of the overall purpose of AFL, which is to develop learners’ active engagement, involvement, participation and autonomy. Therefore, the complexities of classroom

negotiation of meaning with learners with complex learning needs within AFL practices should be acknowledged in the design of AFL policy and implementation.

According to the Ministry of Education position paper (2011), building teachers' assessment capability is crucial in AFL practices. Teachers need constant professional development in understanding how to engage with students especially those with CLDD whose learning profiles are not clear cut, and who need alternative innovative pedagogies in order to meet their needs. This needs teachers to have a deep understanding of AFL principles and how to translate them into participative learning, and what tools and strategies to use in order to get there. If inclusive education is to be achieved, schools, universities and policy developers need to work with teachers to frame AFL learning resources and policy that is inclusive. Finally, it is recommended that universities and policy developers acknowledge value of and utilise the knowledge that special educators have in order to enhance inclusion in education.

### **6.5. Implications for further research and limitations of the present study**

This investigation was a small scale study which involved a small number of participants from one school. The documents and audio visual images that were reviewed were those that were voluntarily provided by the participants. This might pose a problem that information provided was not very authentic. A future large scale study with in depth investigation into perceptions of special educators from different contexts and schools, which also includes a reviewing of all documents and audio visual materials, in order to test the findings raised in this study, is required. Furthermore, in view of the findings of this study, further research is needed into the extent of the effectiveness of the tools which were used to enhance access of AFL with learners with CLDD.

These perceptions that emerged from this study need to be tested with other populations in New Zealand special schools which use AFL as an assessment strategy. This could help to see whether the findings of this study can be generalised. Replications of this study in different educational settings such as stand-alone units' or mainstream schools with learners with CLDD worldwide could provide useful insights on how AFL works in these learners, and will also form a collective database for effective comparison and theory building in this subject.

There is very little research in the field which examine the input that AFL practices have on the learning of learners with special needs, let alone those with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Participants in this study made themselves vulnerable in allowing their practices to be scrutinised while they themselves were trying to explore ways of AFL work with this group of learners. It is therefore paramount for more research to be done on the use of AFL with a similar group of students. In depth research is needed on how AFL increases engagement, involvement and participation and how long it takes for students to acquire these skills. Further research is also needed to determine whether, students can generalise the skills they gained through the use of AFL to their everyday lives outside school.

A longitudinal case study tracking a group of learners with CLDD who use AFL from new entrant through to adulthood, which specifically investigates their engagement, involvement and participation, may help others to understand the complexities of the life experiences of those students and help to determine whether they become autonomous lifelong learners, and whether the quality of their life improves.

#### **6.6. Final Remarks.**

AFL is believed as having many advantages for student learning which have been proven for student by the findings of this study with learners with CLDD. These include improvement of students' capability to communicate their learning, more engagement, participation and involvement and the development of autonomy. However, effective AFL practices with this group of learners, demands significant teacher time, motivation and emotional energy; for building positive learning focused relationships and exploring alternative ways of communicating which enhances students' engagement, involvement and participation. This level of demand on teacher capabilities increases in a supportive environment where continuous dialogue occurs among students, teachers and school administrators. Therefore, by understanding the significance and effectiveness of AFL in enhancing learning in learners with CLDD, supports special educator to find ways to develop teacher capabilities which in turn helps to develop students' capacity as learners.

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## Appendix A

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### **Negotiating entry to the site**

Negotiating entry to the site required permission from the board of trustees. This was negotiated through the principal. Three schools which were using assessment for learning with students with complex learning needs and disabilities were approached. Two responded positively, but one of them was dropped down because of timing.

This section contains:

- A letter to the principal requesting site access.
- An information sheet for the principal and the Board of Trustees
- Consent for site access and request for permission to review school documents.
- Letter to principal confirming selection
- Letter to principal informing non-selection



## APPLICATION FOR SITE ACCESS (SCHOOL SITE)

### SCHOOL PRINCIPAL /BOARD OF TRUSTEES

#### Project Title

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

The Principal

School Name

School Address

Date

Dear .....,

My name is Shingai Muchecheterwa. I am a Master student in The School of Education at AUT (Auckland University of Technology). I am currently conducting a research study in partial fulfilment of a Master of Education qualification, and I would like to invite your school to participate in it. Using a case study approach, I am trying to investigate the perceptions of special Educators on the effectiveness of using Assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities while highlighting on the adaptations and modifications required if any.

Your school was chosen because it has been undertaken to implement assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities and has been using AFL practices for at least two years. If more than the required number of schools register an interest to participate in the study, participating schools will be randomly selected in 'names in a hat' style. A letter will be sent to the principal of the selected

school to inform them of the selection. Schools which are not selected will be notified through a letter to the principal too.

I have enclosed two documents:

- Document 1 is an information sheet. It provides details of the proposed study and your rights associated with this research project. Please read it and if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor.
- Document 2 is a school data sheet. You are requested to complete this form and return it in the provided envelop. This form gives me the permission to review some of your school documents and policies which are related to this study as part of my data gathering.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. If you need further information, I can be contacted at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

My supervisor can be contacted at [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz)

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013, AUTEK Reference number 12/335**

# Participant Information Sheet

**APPLICATION FOR SITE ACCESS (SCHOOL SITE)**

**SCHOOL PRINCIPAL /BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

## **Date Information Sheet Produced:**

02/02/13

## **Project Title**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

## **An Invitation**

My name is Shingai Muchecheherwa. I am a Master student in The School of Education at AUT (Auckland University of technology). I am currently conducting a research study in partial fulfilment of a Master of Education qualification, and I would like to invite your school to participate in it. Using a case study approach, I am trying to investigate the perceptions of special Educators on the effectiveness of using Assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities while highlighting on the adaptations and modifications required if any.

Your school was chosen because it has been undertaken to implement assessment for learning with students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities and has been using AFL practices for at least two years. If more than the required number of schools

register an interest to participate in the study, participating schools will be randomly selected in 'names in a hat' style. A letter will be sent to the principal of the selected school to inform them of the selection. Schools which are not selected will be notified through a letter to the principal too.

I have enclosed another document:

- Document 1 is a school data sheet. You are requested to complete this form and return it in the provided envelop. This form gives me the permission to review some of your school documents and policies which are related to this study as part of my data gathering.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. If you need further information, I can be contacted at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

My supervisor can be contacted at [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz)

### **What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of this research is to increase understandings about the effectiveness of AFL with learners who have CLDD, and to investigate the adaptations and modifications that may be applied to this practice. It will be presented as a thesis which will be marked and kept in the Library at AUT. A copy will be donated to the school and the findings could be used for strategic planning. Some of the contents of this research may be used in conference papers, for journal articles and other academic publications or presentations.

### **What will happen in this research?**

If you decide to participate, teachers in your school will be recruited to participate in the study. This is a voluntary exercise, so invitations will be send to them together with a participant information sheet. Those who will have consented to participate will meet with me for a one hour interview where they will answer questions about, and narrate their experiences in using AFL with their classes. The meetings will take place in a quiet place of their choice. We will have to discuss timing at a later stage. The interview will be audio taped and later transcribed by me, so that I can accurately reflect on their narrated experiences and interpret them.

They will be asked to verify the transcribed data for accuracy. The tapes will only be reviewed by them, my supervisor and me in order to transcribe and analyse them. After analysing and interpreting the data I will then write up my findings. These tapes will be kept in a safe place and then be destroyed after a time frame set by the university. Video recordings of their classroom practice and any other existing documents that are held in the school may be looked at in order to fill in the gaps in the story and get a full picture of this practice. By consenting to participate in the research they will also be consenting to the use of all the related documents held by the school.

### **What are the benefits?**

As mentioned above the purpose of the research is so that I can meet the requirements of completing a Master of Education qualification. Although the school probably would not benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that others in special education and in the community will. It will also add to the pool of research knowledge that is there which helps in the education of learners with special needs.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

The name of the school or its location will not be identified and pseudonyms will be used if need be, Furthermore, Participants will not be identified in any way, in any report except as Teacher, Teacher Aide, Principal, Syndicate Leader etc. Pseudonyms of their choice will be used and if they do not wish to choose one, the researcher will choose one for them. The same will apply for the school name. Although the school will not be identified, staff members within the school will know who was involved in the project. To protect the anonymity of participants, all staff will be requested not to divulge this knowledge to outside parties. All information collected will be kept in a safe place and no one is allowed to have access to it except the researcher, the participant, supervisor and the programme administrator. Participation is confidential and the study information will be kept in a secure location at the AUT University.

### **What are the costs of participating in this research?**

There will be no cost to the school at all.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You will be given one week to read through the information pack so that you can make an informed decision. If more time is required you can let me know through the contact details provided below. You may also request time to meet with my supervisor and she will be happy to answer any questions you might have concerning your participation before you make your decision. You may contact me at 021 157 1731 or e-mail me at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com) , or Dr Anne Grey at [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz)

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you would like to participate, please read the information pack and complete the consent form enclosed and put it in the provided envelope and Dr Anne Grey will come and collect it after a week. You can also hand the sealed envelope to the school secretary where Dr Grey can pick it up.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

A final copy of the research will be donated to the school.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Anne Grey at [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz) and her phone number is (09) 921 9999 ext. 7231.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext. 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?****Researcher Contact Details:**

Shingai Muchecheterwa at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com).

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Dr Anne Grey - [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz)

Phone number is (09) 921 9999 ext. 7231.

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of  
April, 2013, AUTEK Reference number 12/335**

**A LETTER TO THE SCHOOL SELECTED  
TO PARTICIPATE  
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL/ BOARD OF  
TRUSTEES**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

The Principal

Name of school

Address of School

Date

Dear .....,

Thank you for registering your interest to participate in this research by completing and returning the data sheet. A number of schools expressed interest in participating.

Your school has been selected to participate. Enclosed is a consent form for site access. Please complete it and return it

in the stamped addressed envelope. Upon receipt of your consent form I shall contact you to make arrangements to come and meet with potential participants from your school to give them participant information sheets and answer all questions they may have relating to the project.

Thank you once again for having taken time to consider and respond to this request. I look forward to contacting my study in your school.

Yours sincerely

Shingai Muchecheterwa (Researcher)

[fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013  
AUTEC Reference number 12/335***

**A LETTER TO THE SCHOOL NOT SELECTED TO  
PARTICIPATE  
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL/ BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

The Principal

Name of school

Address of School

Date

Dear .....,

Thank you for registering your interest to participate in this research by completing and returning the data sheet. A number of schools expressed interest in participating. Of these, one school has been selected and the Principal has confirmed the school's willingness to participate and support this research.

Your school has not been selected for participation

Thank you once again for having taken time to consider and respond to this request.

Yours sincerely

Shingai Muचेचेतेरवा (Researcher)

[fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013*

*AUTEC Reference number 12/335*

## Appendix B

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### Contacting Participants

To invite people to volunteer to participate in this research, an information sheet and consent forms, along with a self-addressed envelope, were taken to the school by my research supervisor. Since it was insider research, this was to alleviate the ethical issue of conflict of interest. There were two information sheets and consent forms which are outlined below.

This section contains copies of:

- A participant information sheet to all potential participants.
- An information sheet for parents whose children featured in the videos.
- Two consent forms for teachers- one for interviews and one for the use of video materials.
- Consent form for parents.
- A letter to the selected participants
- A letter to the participant who were not selected.

# Participant



# Information Sheet

**Date Information Sheet Produced:**

07/02/13

**Project Title**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

**An Invitation**

Dear -----

My name is Shingai Mucheheterwa. I am a Master student in The School of Education at AUT (Auckland University of technology). I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my Master of Education qualification, and I would like to invite you to participate in it. I am trying to investigate the perceptions of special Educators' perceptions on the effectiveness of using Assessment for learning for students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities while highlighting on the adaptations and modifications required if any.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection with no consequences. Your participation in this research will not advantage or disadvantage in anyway.

### **The Purpose of this research**

The purpose of this research is to increase understandings about the effectiveness of AFL with learners who have CLDD, and to investigate the adaptations and modifications that may be applied to this practice. It will be presented as a thesis which will be marked and kept in the Library at AUT. A copy will be donated to the school and the findings could be used for strategic planning. Some of the contents of this research may be used in conference papers, for journal articles and other academic publications or presentations.

### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You were chosen because you work in the school that was chosen for the study and because you have been exposed to some professional development related to AFL and have been using AFL practices for at least two years and also that you can fluently narrate your experiences related to the use of this practice. If more than the required number of staff register an interest to participate in the study, participants will be randomly selected in batches related to their job (SMT, Teachers, Teacher Aides) – ‘names in a hat’ style.

### **What will happen in this research?**

If you decide to participate, you will meet with me or Dr Anne Grey (my supervisor) for a one hour interview where you will answer questions about , and narrate your experiences in using AFL with your class. The meetings will take place in the interview room at Sir Keith Park School or any quiet place you might suggest. We will have to discuss timing at a later stage. The interview will be audio taped and later transcribed by me, so that I can accurately reflect on your narrated experiences and interpret them. You will be asked to verify the transcribed data for accuracy. The tapes will only be reviewed by you, my supervisor and me in order to transcribe and analyse them. After analysing and interpreting the data I will then write up my findings. These tapes will be kept in a safe place and then be destroyed after a time frame set by the university. Video recordings of your classroom practice and any other existing documents that are held in the school may be looked at in order to fill in the gaps in the story and get a full picture of this practice. By consenting to participate in the research you will also be consenting to the use of all the related documents held by the school.

### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

One possible risk which narrative participants could face is related the emotional impact of having their stories re-interpreted by the researcher. This means your own understanding of the experiences might be compromised. This might cause tension and anxiety on your part. In narrative research, the researcher's interpretation of the narrative might be viewed as intrusive and damaging. However, to avoid this, I will be maintaining continuous collaboration with you to make sure we have a shared understanding.

### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

If you feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions do not hesitate to let me know because you do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. If you feel any discomfort at any stage of the interviews or research you can choose to stop. This decision will not impact you in any way because it is your right.

### **What are the benefits of this research?**

Also as mentioned above the purpose of the research is so that I can meet the requirements of completing a Master of Education qualification. Although you probably would not benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that others in special education and in the community will.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

Participants will not be identified in any way, in any report except as Teacher, Teacher Aide, Principal, Syndicate Leader etc. Pseudonyms of your choice will be use and if you do not wish to choose one, the researcher will choose one for you. Although the school will not be identified, staff members within the school will know who was involved in the project. To protect the anonymity of participants, all staff will be requested not to divulge this knowledge to outside parties. All information collected will be kept in a safe place and no one is allowed to have access to it except the researcher, the participant, supervisor and the programme administrator. Participation is confidential and the study information will be kept in a secure location at the AUT University.

### **What are the costs of participating in this research?**

There will be no monetary reward as a result of participating in this research, but you will be compensated for any travel expenses incurred. The only other cost is your time

which is an hour long interview and time required to verify the transcript. If any other costs arise we will collaborate and come to an agreement.

### **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You will be given one week to read through the information pack so that you can make an informed decision. If more time is required you can let me know through the contact details provided below. You may also request time to meet with my supervisor who will be carrying out the recruitment and she will be happy to answer any questions you might have concerning your participation before you make your decision. You may contact me at 021 157 1731 or e-mail me at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com), or Dr Anne Grey at [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz)

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you would like to participate, please read the information pack and complete the consent form enclosed and put it in the provided envelope and Dr Anne Grey will come and collect it after a week. You can also hand the sealed envelope to the school secretary where Dr Grey can pick it up.

### **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

You will be involved in the verification of the transcribed interviews and the final findings. These will be given to you by me.

### **What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding anything in this research or the nature of this project can be discussed with me because I would like for us to be as collaborative as possible throughout the research. If the concerns are something you are not comfortable to discuss with me, they you can contact the Project Supervisor, Anne Grey at (09) 921 9999 ext. 7231, or e-mail [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz).

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTECH, Dr Rosemary Godbold, [rosemary.godbold@aut.ac.nz](mailto:rosemary.godbold@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext 6902.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Shingai Muchecheterwa at 021 157 1731 or e-mail at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Anne Grey at (09) 921 9999 ext. 7231, or e-mail [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz).

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013, AUTEK Reference number 12/335**

# Information Sheet

**Date Information Sheet Produced:**

07/01/13

**Project Title**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of the practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

**Dear -----,**

My name is Shingai Muchecheterwa. I am a Master student in The School of Education at AUT (Auckland University of technology). I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my Master of Education qualification, and I would like to invite you to participate in it. I intend to investigate the perceptions of special Educators' perceptions on the effectiveness of using Assessment for learning (AFL) for students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) while highlighting on the adaptations and modifications required if any. I will be interviewing your child's teacher and reviewing some of the documents and videos he/she used and took during his/her teaching while using this method, I was wondering if you would be allow me to review these documents with information about your child and watch the videos only for the purposes of reflection and gathering data about the teacher's practices. Your child's name and details will not be published in anyway because the research is mainly concerned in

finding out the teacher's perceptions which might help other educators who are using or would like to use Assessment for learning with their students.

Your consent for me to use these documents in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection with no consequences. Your consent will not advantage or disadvantage your child in anyway.

### **The Purpose of this research**

The purpose of this research is to increase the understandings about the effectiveness of AFL with learners who have CLDD, and to investigate the adaptations and modifications that may be applied to this practice in order to make it accessible by these students. It will be presented as a thesis which will be marked and kept in the Library at AUT. A copy will be donated to the school your child attends and the findings could be used for strategic planning. Some of the contents of this research may be used in conference papers, for journal articles and other academic publications or presentations, but the videos of your child will not be shown as part of a conference presentation.

### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

The researcher is working with your child's teacher and therefore your child features in some of the videos he/she took for his/her reflection, and also there is information about your child in the classroom documents that are going to be reviewed.

### **What will happen in this research?**

I will interview your child's teacher about what he/she thinks about using Assessment for learning with students with CLDD. In order to gather the full range of data needed I will also review some documents which your child's teacher used while using this method and these may include information about your child. I will also watch videos which she took while working with the class and your child might be in these videos. That is why I am asking for your permission to do so.

### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

There are no known risks for your child.

### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

N/A

What are the benefits of this research?

Also as mentioned above one purpose of the research is for me to meet the requirements of completing a Master of Education qualification. Although you probably would not benefit directly from this study, by allowing me to use watch images of your child working with the teacher, it will be adding to the richness of the data in the pool of research on this subject, that might help others in special education and in the community at large. Your child's school might also benefit by using some of the findings of this research for strategic planning.

**What compensation is available for injury or negligence?**

Since I will not be working directly with your child, I do not foresee any. All due care will be taken to uphold confidentiality and privacy of all information gathered in the documents reviews and names will not be used. If need be, pseudonyms will be used to identify information about students.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

The research focus is on the teaching and the teachers. Your child is not a focus of the research. Pseudonyms will be used instead of actual names. Only the researcher, her supervisor Dr Anne Grey and the class teacher will know about the documents reviewed and will endeavour to ensure privacy is kept. All information collected will be kept in a safe place and no one is allowed to have access to it except the researcher, the participant (your child's teacher), supervisor and the programme administrator. Participation is confidential and the study information will be kept in a secure location at AUT.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

There are no costs to you, either in money or time. Your permission to use the documents and videos is all I ask.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You will be given one week to read through the information pack so that you can make an informed decision. If more time is required you can let me know through the contact details provided below.

If you need more information about this matter, you may contact me at 021 157 1731 or e-mail me at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com) , or Dr Anne Grey at [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz)

**How do I give consent for the documents and videos of my child to be used in this research?**

If you would agree to the documents and videos being used, please sign the enclosed consent form.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding anything in this research or the nature of this project can be discussed with me because I would like for us to be as collaborative as possible throughout the research. If the concerns are something you are not comfortable to discuss with me, then you can contact the Project Supervisor, Anne Grey at (09) 921 9999 ext. 7231, or e-mail [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz).

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Dr Rosemary Godbold, [rosemary.godbold@aut.ac.nz](mailto:rosemary.godbold@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext 6902.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Shingai Muchecheterwa - 021 157 1731,

or e-mail at [fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Anne Grey - (09) 921 9999 ext. 7231,

or e-mail [anne.grey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anne.grey@aut.ac.nz).

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013, AUTEK Reference number 12/335.**

## **Consent Form**

For use when interviews are involved.

*Project title:*

*Assessment for learning: Special Educators' perceptions on the effectiveness of the practice for students who have complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?*

*Project Supervisor: Anne Grey*

*Researcher: Shingai Muchecheherwa*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 07/01/13
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed. I also understand that by consenting to participate in this research I am giving the researcher access to any of my AFL practice documents held by the school. I also agree to share practice documents with the researcher
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to take part in this research.

Participant's signature:

.....  
.....

Participant's name:

.....  
.....

Participant's Contact details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013, AUTEK Reference 12/335.*

**Consent and Release Form**  
For use with photographic projects



*Project title:*

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators’ perceptions about the effectiveness of the practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

*Project Supervisor:*     **Anne Grey**

*Researcher:* *Shingai Muchecheeterwa*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 07/01/13
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that I may withdraw my consent for the use of the video images any time prior to data collection, without disadvantaging him/her in any way.
- If I withdraw after some data has been collected, I understand that all relevant information will be destroyed.
- I permit the researcher to use my video recordings with as part of this project only as mentioned in the information sheet.
- I understand that the video recordings will be used for watching and reflection purposes only and will not be published in any form outside of this project without my written permission.

Participant’s signature:

.....  
.....

Participant’s name:

.....  
.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013, AUTEK Reference number 12/335*

## Parent/Guardian Consent Form

For use in conjunction with either an appropriate Assent Form when legal minors (people under 16 years) are participants in the research or a Consent Form when involving participants aged 16-20 years whose age makes them vulnerable as concerns consent.



*Project title:*

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of the practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

*Project Supervisor:* **Anne Grey**

*Researcher:* **Shingai Mucheheterwa**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 07/01/13
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that lesson observation reports and video clips which may have information and images of my child in them will be used.
- I understand that I may withdraw consent for the use of my child/children's images or any information that are have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw my child/children after some data has been collected, I understand that all relevant information including reports or written notes referring to my child, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to information and images with my child/children to be reviewed as part in this research.
- I wish to receive a copy of the report of the reviewed documents from the research (please tick one): Yes  No

Child/children's name/s :

.....  
...  
.....  
.....

Parent/Guardian's signature:

.....

Parent/Guardian's name:

.....

Parent/Guardian's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4th of April, 2013, AUTEK Reference number type the AUTEK 12/335.*

**A LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS WHO  
WERE SELECTED TO PARTICIPATE  
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL/ BOARD OF  
TRUSTEES**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators’ perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

The Name of Participant

Name of school

Address of School

Date

Dear .....,

Thank you for registering your interest to participate in this research by completing and returning your consent forms. A number of people expressed interest in participating and random “names in the hat” was conducted.

You have been selected to participate. I shall contact you to make arrangements for my supervisor to come and meet with all selected participants from your school answer all questions that you may have relating to the project.

Thank you once again for having taken time to consider and respond to this request. I look forward to contacting my study with you.

Yours sincerely

Shingai Muchecheherwa (Researcher)

[fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013***

***AUTEC Reference number 12/335***

**A LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS NOT SELECTED TO  
PARTICIPATE**

**SCHOOL PRINCIPAL/ BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

Name of Participant

Name of school

Address of School

Date

Dear .....,

Thank you for registering your interest to participate in this research by completing and returning the consent form. A number of people expressed interest in participating. As mentioned in the participant information sheet, participants were randomly selected using the “names in the hat” method. Unfortunately, you have not been selected. However, I will keep your consent form in case someone pulls out. I will communicate with you by letter if that happens.

Thank you once again for having taken time to consider and respond to this request.

Yours sincerely

Shingai Muhecheterwa (Researcher)

[fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013*

*AUTEC Reference number 12/335*

## Appendix C

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### **Semi structured interviews**

Ten people were selected to participate in this research study.

This section contains a copy of:

- The semi structured interviews.



Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

### **Interview questions**

#### **General Information:**

- What is your position at this school?
- Have you always worked in special education?
  - Prompt =Have you taught / worked in mainstream schools?

How long have you worked in special education?

- Please tell me about your current class / school?
- How many students do you have in your class?
- What are their learning needs and disabilities?
- Do you think these students are capable learners?
- How do you cater for their learning?

#### **Overall perceptions concerning Assessment for learning with learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities.**

- If you were asked to explain AFL to a colleague / parent, what would you say?
- What are your thoughts about using assessment for learning (AFL) with your students / students at your school?
- Would you introduce AFL to your special education colleagues as a worthwhile approach? Why / why not?
- What do you think are good AFL practices with learners with CLDD?
- Can you comment on any outcomes for students related to AFL?
- Can you give me some examples of how AFL is used in your school / class?

- Do you have to make any adaptations and adjustments to the tools and strategies you use in AFL for these students?
- Can you tell me more about any of these adaptations and adjustments?
- AFL was initially established as an approach used in mainstream teaching. Do you think it is appropriate to use in Special Ed contexts? Why / Why not?
- Do you think AFL means the same thing to these students as their mainstream counterparts?
- Do the principles of AFL work the same way with them as with their peers in mainstream?
- What if anything makes it difficult for you to use the AFL approach with your students / in your school?
- What, if anything, helps you to use the AFL approach with your students / in your school?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about AFL?

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013***  
***AUTEC Reference number 12/335***

### **Transcript verification**

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. A copy of the transcript was sent to the participants to verify the contents. Enclosed with the transcript were a covering letter and a verification form.

This section contains a copy of:

- A covering letter to participants
- A transcript verification form

## TRANSCRIPT VERIFICATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

School Address

Date

Dear [name]

I have enclosed the interview transcript for my research project. Can you read the transcript and highlight any material that you do not want to be included in the final research report.

Please do not correct any typing errors, spelling mistakes, sentences structures or grammar as this will be done later. I would like to remind you that any interview material we use in the final report is anonymous, and no individual names will be used. If you need to make any changes, please make them on the transcript. I have also enclosed a form for you to complete to show that you have verified your transcript. Can you please sign it and return together with the transcript in two weeks' time.

If I do not hear from you within two weeks, I will assume that you do not want to make any changes. If you need to contact me within the two weeks, you can do so on email or mobile phone.

Thank you again for your willingness to support this project. It is much appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Shingai Muhecheterwa

[fpshingai@hotmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@hotmail.com)

0211571731

## TRANSCRIPT VERIFICATION FORM

Assessment for learning (AFL): Special Educators' perceptions about the effectiveness of this practice for students who complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD)?

**Researcher: Shingai Mucheche**

[fpshingai@gmail.com](mailto:fpshingai@gmail.com)

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcripts of the interview conducted by me.

Signed: .....

Name: .....

Date:

## Appendix E

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Data analysis for this research study was informed by three recognised approaches: discourse analysis, thematic analysis and constant comparison method. It was also conducted with the assistance of the data analysis software Nvivo.

This section contains a copy of:

- A page from three transcripts showing initial coding. (One from each category interviewed).
- Examples of queries ran to analyse the data.

## Sample of participant A's interview transcript

wanted them to achieve.

Int- Do you think assessment for learning gives students more ownership?

A- Absolutely, they can tell you exactly what they are learning and why they are learning it- even our students with quite severe intellectual disabilities know exactly what it is they are doing and why they are doing it.

Int- By taking ownership of their learning what skills do you think might develop in the students?

A- Confidence; better self-management of time; resources and all sorts of things and much more feeling of self-worth and them thinking about their own thinking and learning.

Int-What do you think are good AFL practices?

A- Umm- good practices- constant talking about students, where they are, what they need to know and learn, how that can be achieved and working alongside them; getting them to see for themselves what it is they are doing; getting students to think for themselves what they might want to do next ; ahh, all those kinds of things.

Int-do you think involving students in decision making about their learning will be one of them?

A- Absolutely.

The screenshot shows a software interface with a transcript on the left and a coding density chart on the right. The transcript contains several questions and answers from Participant A. The coding density chart on the right lists various codes and their corresponding locations in the transcript. The codes are: physical disabilities, downer's syndrome, behaviour problems, Students as learners, other health issues, communication disability, intellectual sign language for communication support, autonomy, culture of the school, time adjustments, support, scaffolding, disabilities, Definition of assessment for learning, Clarity about teaching and learning, achievement, ownership, self-management, thinking, reflective practices, and involvement. The chart uses colored bars to indicate the density of these codes across the transcript.

## Sample of participant I's interview coding- teacher aide

The screenshot displays a coding software window titled "Participant I". The main area on the left contains the following text:

I- Yes.

Int- What is the difference?

I- They can identify pictures and stuff when they have been asked and answer questions. They are talking more.

Int- So they are communicating more?

I- Yes. With visuals to help them know what to say.

Int- Are there any other differences you have seen in their learning?

I- Things are easier for them to do when they are using the process of assessment for learning. They are more interested in what they do and they are more engaged- they don't run around as much when the teacher is teaching.

Int- "By knowing what to do," do you mean they are now doing some things by themselves?

I- Yes, they can do a lot of things by themselves when we use the AFL process. Some of them can even read it out to us- what we have to do.

Int- So they say to you what they are learning about by using visuals?

I- Yes.

Int- So they are taking ownership of their goals and learning intentions?

On the right side, a vertical coding bar is visible with the following labels and corresponding colored bars:

- reflective practices (purple bar)
- achievement (purple bar)
- Learning focused relationships (purple bar)
- Definition of assessment for learning (purple bar)
- Students as learners (purple bar)
- involvement (purple bar)
- visuals for support (purple bar)
- motivation (purple bar)
- autonomy (green bar)
- ownership (blue bar)

At the top of the coding bar, the text "Coding Density" is visible, along with a vertical scale and a "111" label.

## Sample of Participant C's interview coding-Senior manager

The screenshot shows a text editor window titled "Participant C" with a transcript of an interview. The text is as follows:

going to be leading in their learning and whatever pedagogical approach that works- be it using the engagement profiles or anything else, AFL underpins it. I mean even if you are using the MOVE programme which is Movement Opportunities Via Education –whereby you are helping someone with a physical disability to sit, stand and walk to their greatest level of independence- I believe AFL can be worked in with that programme . So if you are in the- for example, a lot of our teacher aides spent most of their time in the toilet –not for themselves. If you are teaching someone to take three steps backwards and then sit on the toilet –you still need all your AFL strategies, you need to be very clear about what you are doing- even some modelling goes on with helping them and showing them, so –obviously they need feedback on whether they are doing it right- constantly . You know you really up close and personal so you need to have that learning focused relationships the right way- all of it underpins so whatever programme you are using or practice that is trying to find a way in, particularly for some autistic students –AFL goes with it. It does not replace it. You know it needs to be embedded in everything you do until it is second nature to be doing it. Then I think you will be an awesome special education teacher.

Int- I had a question similar to what you have said but that is good that you have picked it up. Do you think AFL means the same thing to these students as their mainstream counterparts?

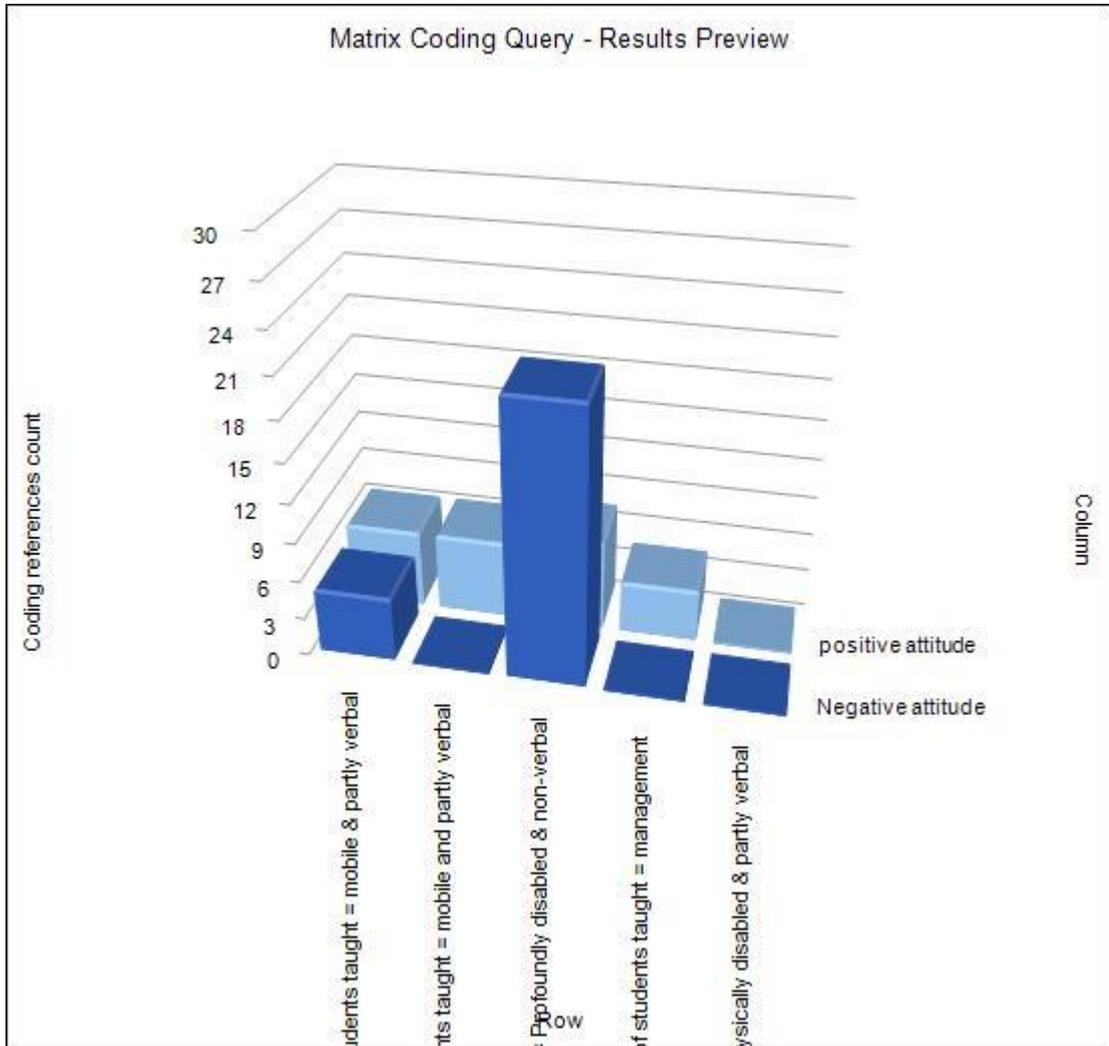
C- I think so. AFL is all about moving forward and achieving; it's about being given all the information you need and all the support you need to further your learning. That's no different for us

The right sidebar shows a list of codes with colored lines indicating their placement in the text:

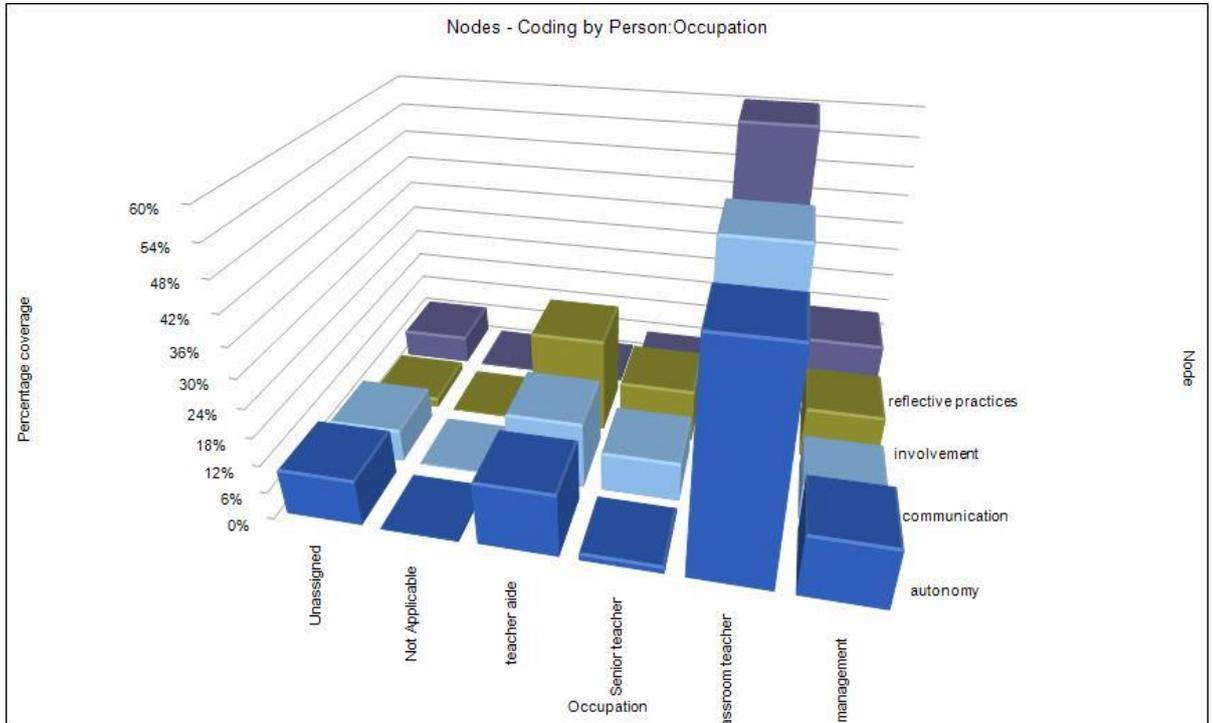
- support
- disabilities
- Punita Grover - Interview transcription
- Involvement
- Adaptations
- reflection by teachers
- access to AFL
- autonomy
- positive attitude
- effective practices
- communication
- Learning focused relationships
- feedback
- Clarity about teaching and learning
- Students as learners
- reflective practices
- challenges
- Kathy Davidson - Interview transcription
- Coding Density
- culture of the school
- achievement

**Examples of queries ran through Nvivo to analyse data.**

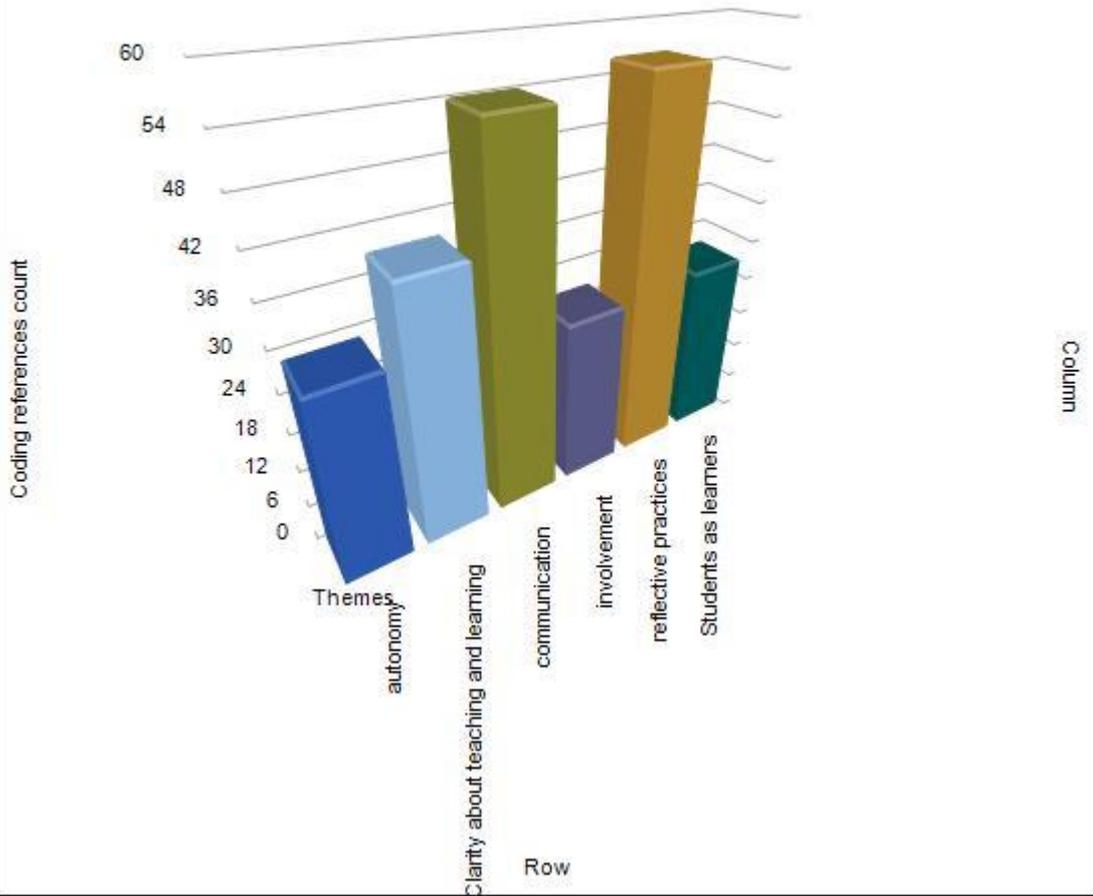
Is there any relationship between a participant's attitude and the students they teach.



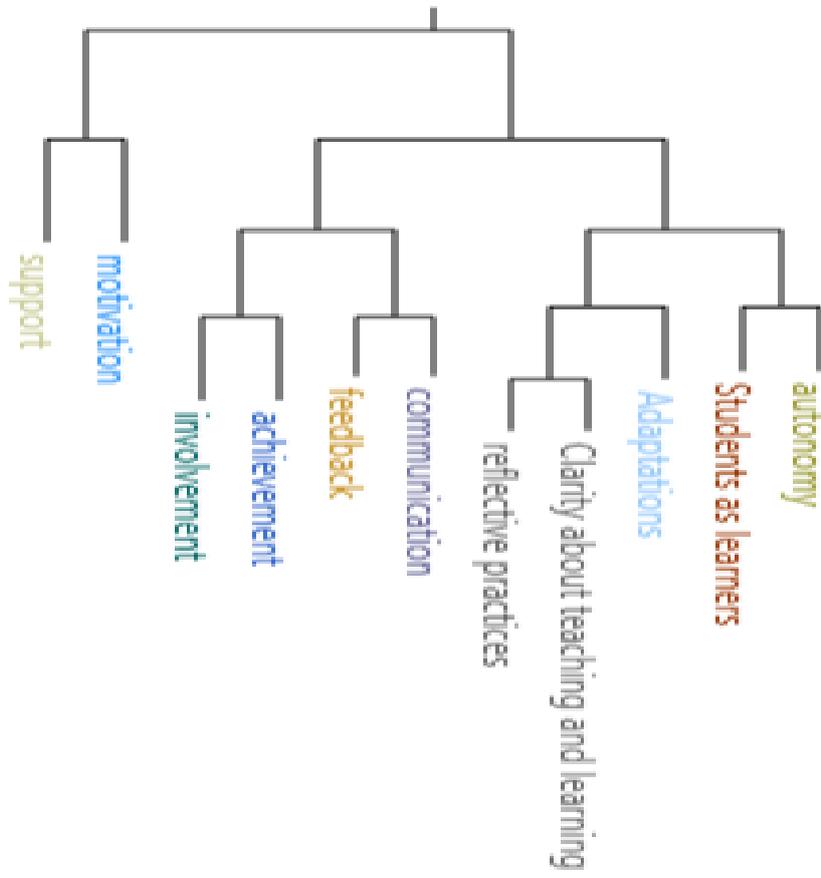
## Comparison of codes by occupation



Matrix Coding Query - Results Preview



## Nodes clustered by coding similarity



Nodes compared by number of items coded

