

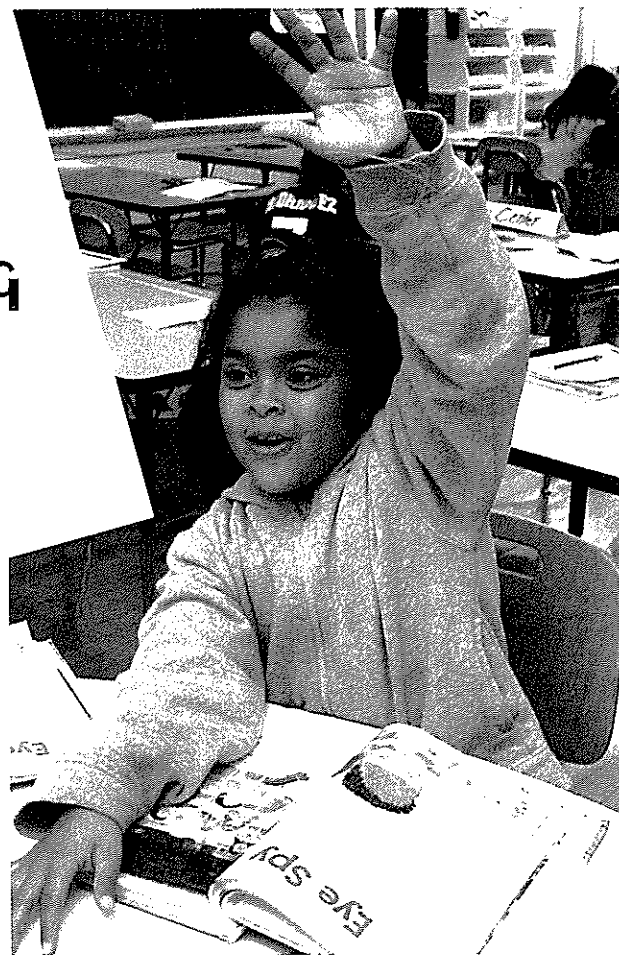
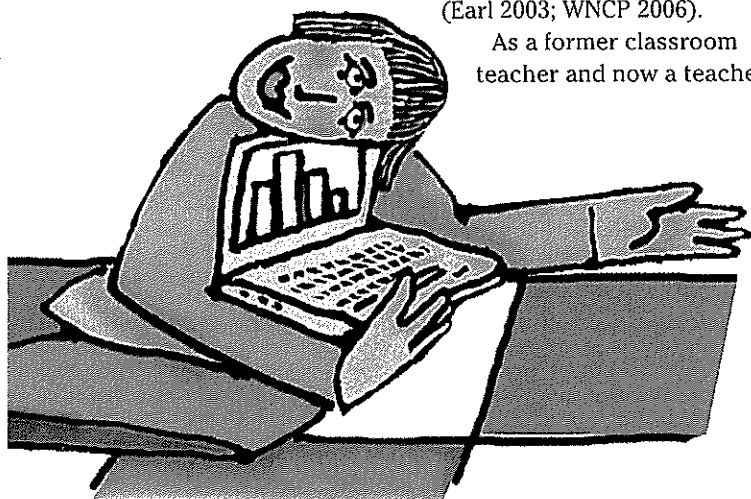
YOUNG CHILDREN ASSESS THEIR LEARNING

The Power of the Quick Check Strategy

Willow Brown

Today's teachers are increasingly aware that opportunities for student self-assessment can lead to children's feelings of ownership of their learning and a greater responsibility for it. A decade ago Stiggins (1997) promised that the practice of involving children in their own assessment could bolster engagement, motivation, and learning. However, self-assessment remains underused as teachers need more classroom examples to help translate this research into daily practice (Earl 2003; WNCP 2006).

As a former classroom teacher and now a teacher



educator, I see that the lessons I learned in a yearlong teacher inquiry with my second grade children are still relevant. The Quick Check strategy and the related teaching behaviors developed then and outlined in this article offer teachers a practical approach to enhancing student engagement and confidence through self-assessment.

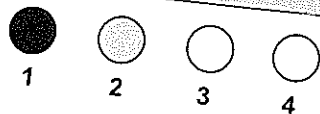
Inquiry, reflection, and resulting commitments

The focus question in my inquiry was, "What happens when second-graders assess their own learning across subjects and throughout the year?" I implemented routines and strategies to increase the children's academic self-awareness and confidence that, with effort, they could improve their achievement. I responded to Schunk's suggestion to "teach students a simple self-recording method and have them practice it on increasingly more complex tasks" (1997, 17) by developing a child-friendly graphic tool, the Quick Check.

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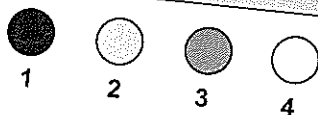
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Early and Later Quick Checks



- 1—I tried this. I can't do it by myself. I need help.
- 2—I can do some of this. I need some help.
- 3—I can do this by myself. I am good at it.
- 4—I am an expert at this. I can help someone else.

Early Quick Check



- 1—I don't know what to do. I need help.
- 2—I can do some of this. I need some help.
- 3—Good Quality. My work meets all of the criteria. I could improve it. I feel OK about it.
- 4—Excellent Quality. My work meets all the criteria. It is the best that I can do. I feel great!

Later Quick Check

How the tool works

Four circles represent a Quick Check, a familiar, generic rubric that allows children to assess their abilities and determine for themselves when they need help. With daily use, the children internalize the Quick Check descriptors so that they can make individual self-assessments and record them on their written work or in a learning log for oral work. Quick Checks become starting points for student-teacher conversations that help each child set and record appropriate goals and identify support that may be provided by teachers, classmates, or family members to help the child reach those goals.

When children revise their written text or thinking or improve performance through extra practice, the child and teacher often reassess the learning or task achievement together. The child fills in the remaining empty circles on the original Quick Check with a different color and celebrates this visible evidence of effort and growth. An introductory Quick Check and a later version (see "Early and Later Quick Checks") encourage children to notice specific criteria and develop awareness of the emotions they experience as they assess each task.

Observations

The Quick Check circles are a significant departure from the sad, neutral, and happy faces sometimes used by young children for assessing their learning. Having once

observed a frustrated child scribble angrily over the sad-face choice, I resolved to reject that method. With the Quick Check, my goal was to devise a strategy to emphasize, in children's minds, expectations of support, improvement, and increasing confidence rather than self-criticism and hopelessness.

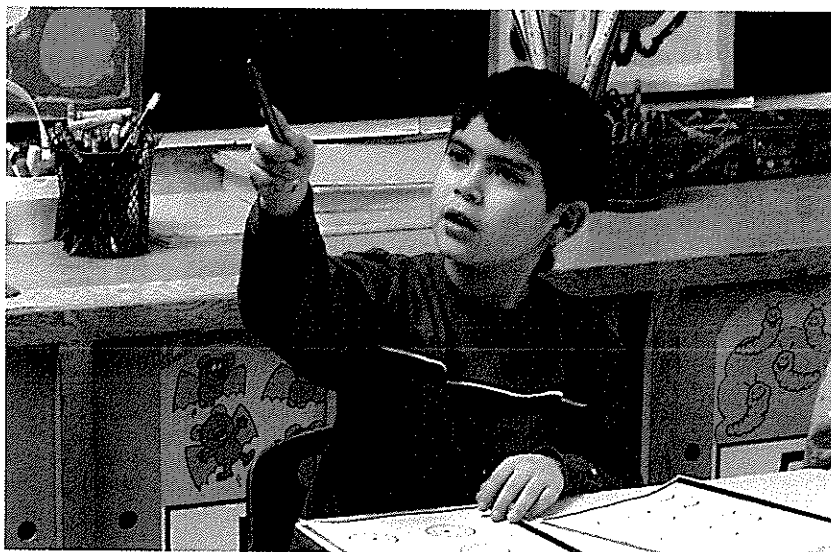
Purposeful teaching behaviors

Over time, I identified, refined, and became committed to four purposeful teaching behaviors that complement and extend the effectiveness of the children's Quick Checks:

1. Helping children set or accept and record individualized goals;
2. Teaching, modeling, and planning ways the children may progress toward goals;
3. Showing the children evidence of their progress with carefully kept records; and
4. Helping the children celebrate goal achievement and attribute positive feelings to their own efforts.

The children's responses and their parents' support for the strategies ensured my ongoing use of these new practices. Many parents shared my surprise at the level of student empowerment achieved. In fact, we were awed by the dignity the children developed as they learned to say what they needed to support their learning and how they planned to obtain that support.

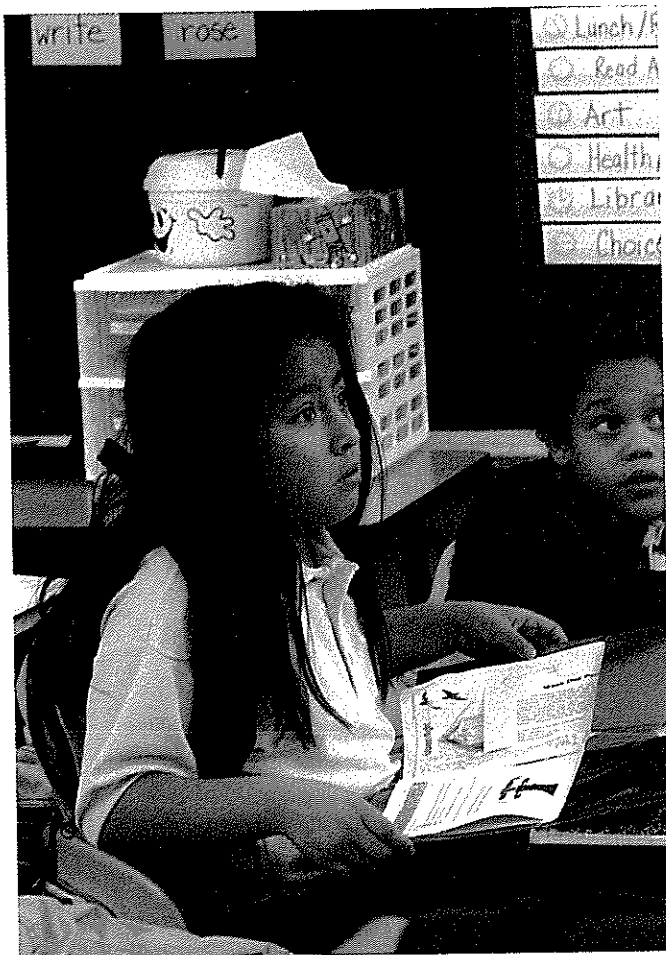
In the following pages, I outline the literature that informed my strategy development and interpretations of children's responses. I then share examples of four purposeful teaching behaviors that I found to contribute to the success of student self-assessment in my classroom.



Informing literature

Stiggins (1997) proposed self-assessment as one way to empower students. Bandura's work (1986) on self-efficacy contributed to Schunk's (1995) view of self-regulated learning. Like Stiggins, Schunk emphasized the importance of helping children develop an internal locus of control, a sense that success results from their own ability and effort. Schunk (1997) recommended that teachers help children develop the skill of self-monitoring and give them opportunities for its use. He urged teachers to design learning environments that give students information on their progress and teach them to set learning goals in response to feedback. Lickona (1991) showed how children can develop social responsibility through self-monitoring, problem solving, and goal setting.

I found research to support an ongoing, comprehensive approach to self-assessment in a primary classroom of children with a variety of learning needs. Dev (1997) identified self-assessment and goal setting as key strategies for strengthening internal motivation for the remedial learning of children with disabilities. Porath (1996) showed that self-assessment is useful for improvement of attitude and motivation in gifted learners.



The suitability of self-assessment for young children was first established by NAEYC in a position paper on curriculum and assessment (NAEYC 1991) and confirmed in a revised document (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003) as well as by researchers such as Glazer (1994) and Marshall (1995). Kohn (1993), however, noted common barriers to increased student responsibility, including a lack of classroom examples. And Meyer, Turner, and Spencer advised that "more individual and contextualized information [was] necessary for understanding how to support students engaged in challenging academic work" (1997, 501). There are strong theories to support student self-evaluation and goal setting, but successful implementation depends on teachers' abilities to translate theories into practical strategies that can be integrated in the patterns of classroom life.

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Helping children set and record individualized goals

Completing a Quick Check tool for second-graders' use was a starting point for two important steps toward the children's independent self-assessment and goal setting. The steps were to

- Focus on a few specific criteria for each learning task, and
- Replace general praise with descriptive feedback related to the criteria (Marshall 1995; Andrade 2008).

Creating criteria

Together the children and I discussed or developed assessment criteria in oral, whole group lessons. Afterward, I sometimes drafted Quick Check forms with specific criteria sets for the children to attach in their notebooks. Students looked at samples of their work to describe why it was "good." For example, they understood that posters about class beliefs should be "neat," "colorful," and "finished." After I pointed out examples of creative work, they agreed to add "original" to their list of criteria.

For unfamiliar assignments, I sometimes explained and gave examples of a new criterion, and I also asked the children to identify criteria that they believed would be important to add to the list. We reviewed Quick Check or criteria lists periodically to see if they needed to be adjusted to

keep us stretching toward improved skills and new goals. The students used each criterion long enough to understand its meaning and gain competence, but they learned to choose or accept new criteria as a sign of their increasing skills and more powerful learning.

In individual conferences, I sometimes invited children to focus on fewer criteria or to add personal criteria to adjust the learning tasks to their ability levels. For example, a student overwhelmed by the thought of completing 10 word problems would be invited to set a personal goal he believed would be achievable—perhaps five problems or even three. A student whose reading and writing was more fluent could choose to add a criterion for comparing texts in her reading response journal, while other students in the class continued to focus on writing comments to connect their reading to their own lives.

Feedback

The teacher's descriptive feedback, such as "I saw you work steadily through the whole class to get this finished" or "All your numerals are formed correctly except the sevens," helped hesitant children fill in their Quick Checks. This feedback also became the model for children's comments about their own work when they discussed their Quick Checks and for the feedback they gave each other during practice times.

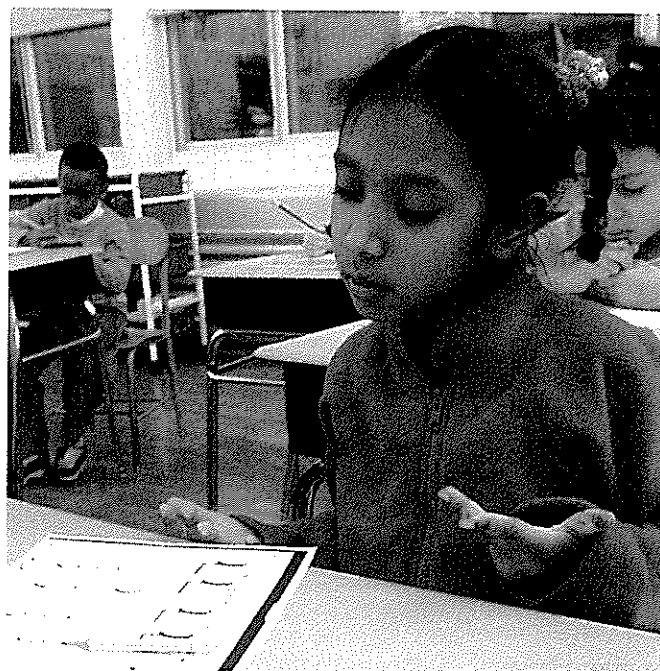
As frequent self-assessment led to more consistent self-monitoring, teacher feedback related to unmet or partially met criteria translated naturally to goals for improvement. For example, in a whole group demonstration, pairs of students took turns having one partner count orally by twos, using odd numbers, while the partner recorded the numerals on the whiteboard. I encouraged the children to begin to associate Quick Checks with specific levels of achievement.

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Responding to my comments, the class agreed that if a pair of students could count to 61 without a mistake, the work would be *Good Quality*—a 3. But if they could get to 103 it would be *Excellent Quality*—a 4!

Practice time

In the practice time that followed a lesson, pairs of students worked diligently to master goals and sign up to visit the Conference Table and have me observe and record their achievements. I asked questions, such as "What will your next challenge be?" to help children who were successful to extend their



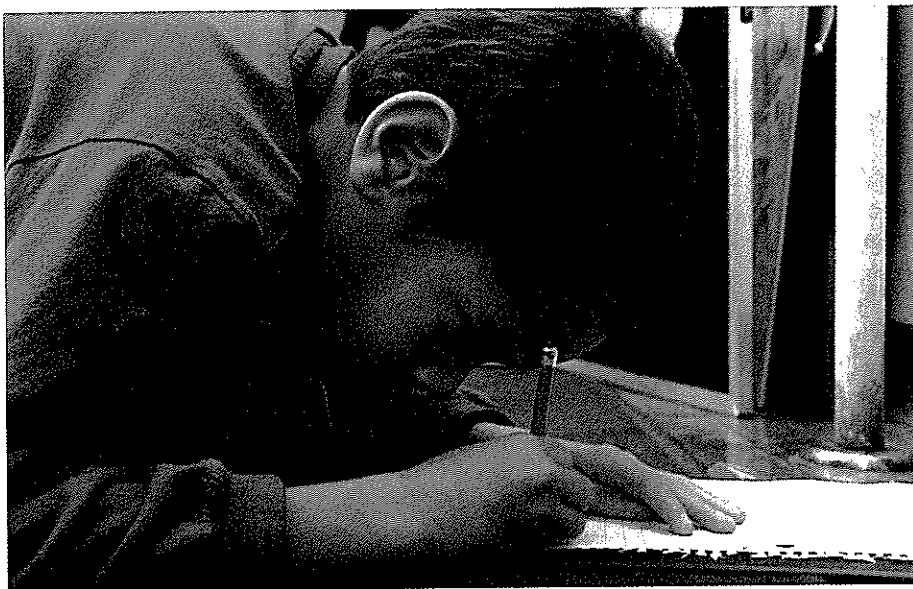
learning goals. For those who had difficulty, I used Unifix cubes, base 10 blocks, or other manipulatives to correct possible misunderstandings of number patterns or to encourage greater attention to accuracy. Students often left the table with a plan for more productive practice recorded in their notebooks or learning logs. For example, their plans frequently included a work habit or a responsibility goal, such as "helping each other stay on the job." When we reassessed performance, I encouraged the children to explain how "staying on the job" had contributed to their success in learning to count accurately.

Tallying up

After showing the children that we could monitor group progress with estimates, tallies, and revised goals for story interruptions, I found that estimating and tallying helped students set individual goals for reducing a problem behavior, such as impulsive poking/touching. I asked the children to estimate how many times a day they used problem behaviors and if they could accept a number slightly lower than that as a goal. Most were eager to keep the tally themselves, and even when the tallies were less than accurate, problem behaviors decreased.

Teaching and planning ways to move toward goals

Glasser (1990) recommended that students have opportunities to revise their work, and Kohn advised that "every day ought to include at least one block of time in which children can decide what to do" (1993, 13). Accordingly, I revised the daily schedule to include two 15-minute



Showing children evidence of their progress

Carefully kept checklists and anecdotal notes let the children see and understand evidence of their growth. For example, Surinder was choosing simple picture books or predictable pattern books that I assessed at a 2 for difficulty. But a month later I could show her that the books she now felt comfortable reading were a 3, with more text, more new words, and less repetition. Surinder recognized her increased ability to handle new challenges, and I believe this recognition contributed to her continued interest in home reading.

As the year progressed and the children learned to read and write

periods of practice and revision time, when I helped children improve their work and encouraged them to help each other. As the second-graders attempted or completed tasks, they put their magnetic name cards in numbered boxes on the whiteboard to indicate that they needed help or were prepared to offer it. This system enabled the children to group themselves for practice and gave me an easy reference from which to make suggestions for grouping.

Children's feedback extended to plans for improvement when I asked, "What help do you need to move from a 2 to a 3?" Ross admitted that he needed to read books he loves with his family every night, and Sharon asked if she could take her word lists to her learning assistance appointments. One poignant example of individual goal setting and support seeking occurred when Sharon learned to record a Quick Check of 1 and gave herself permission to set a frustrating task aside and choose an alternate activity until someone could help her. Surprisingly, she did not abuse this opportunity, and her frequent tantrums and tears, which I had not realized were related to academic frustration, decreased considerably.

For teacher assessments of oral reading fluency, including phrasing, expression, use of phonics, context clues, and self-correcting, as well as the level of reading difficulty for child-selected books, I found that checklists conveyed more information when I used Quick Check numbers from 1 to 4 instead of check marks. The familiar Quick Check frame of reference helped the children understand my assessments and gave us a common language for making individualized improvement plans together. For example, when I showed Jason a consistent score of 2 for Reading Level but a 4 for Word Recognition and suggested that he choose more difficult books, he understood that he needed to be braver about looking for challenges and stretching his skills.

more fluently, I wrote descriptive feedback such as, "I agree! This is a 4 because you completed all examples accurately and you tried the challenge questions." I also encouraged the students to explain their Quick Checks with a written sentence. When self-assessments seemed inaccurate, I invited them to have another look at the criteria and reconsider their Quick Check number. I did not undermine their developing independence, however, by insisting a self-assessment be changed. Over time, comparisons of students' perceptions with my own and with those of their classmates helped the children learn to focus more dependably on criteria and make judgments based on evidence.

We used the Quick Check tool to document progress in recognizing high-frequency words (Fry, Kress, & Fountoukidis 1993), as the children became aspiring members of the Thousand Word Club. Copies of 40 lists of 25 words were stored in a row of numbered envelopes on the wall. The children kept their current word list as a bookmark for frequent home and school practice. During individual performance assessments, each student read words from an unmarked list as I recorded correct words and miscues in the child's personal folder.

After reading, the children predicted their Quick Check, sometimes revising it when I showed them the number of mis-

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cues. Together, we celebrated increases in the number of words they recognized quickly and accurately. For review tests of one hundred words, students built their data collection skills by counting the number of correct words and converting the score to a percentage. Although this exercise was time consuming, the second-graders became acutely aware of the degree of their improvement and eager to practice so as to improve the next assessment.

Celebrating achievement and effort

A culture of celebrating learning successes flows naturally from setting and achieving goals and documenting and discussing achievements. Our celebrations ranged from the personal satisfaction of coloring in the remaining circles on an old Quick Check to well-rehearsed events to summarize children's growth throughout the term, such as portfolio reviews and student-led conferences with parents. Although preparation for student-led conferences took time, they had a powerful effect on student confidence and elicited parental respect for their children as independent individuals.

Families saw and heard evidence that their children and teachers were doing their jobs. They were usually eager

to know how they could help to support learning, and we were ready to tell them. The result was that this end-of-term conference routine became more common throughout our school, and the invitation to families to participate remained open.

With the emphasis on goal setting, benchmarks and milestones were built into most activities; for example, students celebrated moving from the Four Hundred to the Five Hundred Word Club as a step toward ultimately joining the Thousand Word Club. Children enjoyed adding their names to lists of students who had achieved a goal. We photographed triumphant moments, and one photo in particular illustrates the celebration theme: six beaming students stand in front of a whiteboard full of counting numbers to 1,000, a Quick Check of 4, and a student-scribed description of their feelings in red marker above their heads, "We feel terrific, fantastic, excellent, and super smart."

Reflections

Schunk cautioned that "young children may possess developmental limitations that constrain their ability to compare past and present performance" (1997, 22).

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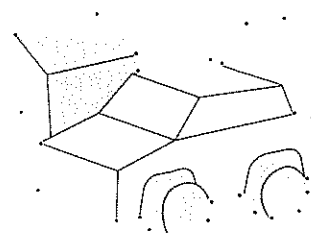
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However, Glazer emphatically stated that young students can assess what they have learned if they have language appropriate for describing their achievements (1994).

The development and successful use of the Quick Check for a wide variety of tasks and behaviors confirm the importance of developing language to describe learning and show that when their language is scaffolded with symbols and modeling, young children can become increasingly capable of self-assessments that increase engagement and learning.

With purposeful teaching behaviors to complement Quick Check assessments, my students showed that they recognized improvement in the volume of work accomplished and in the numbers correct. It was more difficult for them to evaluate quality, but their judgments improved over time as students became familiar with criteria and had more experience comparing teacher assessments with their own. It was true that some students assessed themselves more positively than indicated by the quality of their work, particularly at first, but others overlooked evidence of their success. Increased attention to evidence, as developed through predetermined criteria and assessed with Quick Checks, helped the children gain a more realistic sense of their achievements. The result was a powerful level of integrated engagement in which students understood their learning, genuinely valued what they were doing, and actively participated in classroom activities (Munns & Woodward 2006).

For me, this deep understanding of engagement through self-assessment has endured through my move to intermediate teaching, where I asked seventh-graders many of the same reflective questions, and on into teacher education and graduate school. I continue to expect university students to make meaningful choices about their own differentiated learning and to contribute descriptive feedback within a community of learners. For my second grade students and for those I have taught since then, the power of the Quick Check strategy connects to personal empowerment—an increasing ownership of accomplishments and the planning of the next steps to achieve goals.

In a qualitative classroom study, it is difficult to know how much evidence is enough to declare any strategy a success. Clear, personal validation came for me four years later when I met the teacher who taught my students in third grade, after I had left the school. Not knowing that we

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had taught the same children, the young woman described the children as an amazing group of responsible students who could articulate their achievements and suggest goals for themselves. What more can educators ask than to have the strategies we teach students continue to empower them in later grades and throughout their lifetimes?

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