

Balancing the Assessment of Learning and *for* Learning in Support of Student Literacy Achievement

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Over 15 years ago, Taylor (1991) raised an important issue pertaining to children's assessment in her classic book *Learning Denied*. The story centers on Patrick, a young literacy learner whose school labeled him as having "perceptual problems" and as unable to function well in the "normal" classroom setting. Although Patrick had strong literacy skills developed in his home environment, the school's assessments did not consider these "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1990) and thus identified him as a "deficit reader." When teachers read about what schools sometimes do to students like Patrick, in the name of assessment, their anger and frustration is visible. They are frustrated with the awkward tension between classroom assessment of student learning for accountability purposes and assessment for learning (Stiggins, 2002; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004).

As literacy educators, we encourage teachers to be responsive to and respectful of students' diverse funds of knowledge, knowing that this type of assessment perspective has several benefits for students, teachers, and school administrators. However, in the current climate of high-stakes assessment, teachers are held accountable for teaching curricular standards and content that may not connect with the multiple knowledge bases, experiences, and skills that children bring from their homes and communities. Consequently, there is an unfortunate imbalance between the call to account for what students learn and the need to create the classroom conditions under which they can and should learn. Stiggins (2002) de-

scribed this dilemma and called for a new way of looking at classroom and student assessment:

If we are finally to connect assessment to school improvement in meaningful ways, we must come to see assessment through new eyes. Our failure to find a potent connection has resulted in a deep and intensifying crisis in assessment in American education. Few elected officials are aware of this crisis, and almost no school officials know how to address it. Our current assessment systems are harming huge numbers of students for reasons that few understand. And that harm arises directly from our failure to balance our use of standardized tests and classroom assessments in the service of school improvement. When it comes to assessment, we have been trying to find answers to the wrong questions. (p. 758)

The gap between the assessment of learning and for learning gap is unfortunately quite large in many of today's classrooms, and we know that Patrick's story in *Learning Denied* is not a singular or unique case. Unfortunately, there are thousands of students like Patrick whose home experiences are not sufficiently considered or built upon in the classroom. More than ever before, schools are serving increasing numbers of students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and are pressured to make certain that these students perform well on high-stakes standardized tests. As a result, "teachers are under a microscope as never before" (Klingner, 2002, p. 226). And while many teachers have good intentions and want to view student diversity as a resource, this can be a very difficult perspective for teachers to take when they feel largely responsible for increasing stu-

dent achievement. After all, assessment is oftentimes centered on the curriculum rather than on students and teachers.

Finding a Balance

How might teachers, parents, and schools move toward a balance between the assessment of learning and assessment for learning? Stiggins (2002) maintained that while both the assessment of learning and assessment for learning are essential for student achievement, one is in place and the other is not. To that end, he offered the following action plan for promoting student achievement in our schools and classrooms.

- Match every dollar invested in instruments and procedures intended for the assessment of learning at national, state, and local levels with another dollar devoted to the development of assessment for learning.
- Launch a comprehensive, long-term professional development program at the national, state, and local levels to foster literacy in classroom assessment for teachers, allocating sufficient resources to provide them with the opportunity to learn and grow professionally.
- Launch a similar professional development program in effective large-scale and classroom assessment for state, district, and building administrators, teaching them how to provide leadership in this area of professional practice.
- Change teacher and administrator licensing standards in every state and in all national certification contexts to reflect an expectation of competence in assessment both of and for learning.
- Require all teacher and administrator preparation programs to ensure that graduates are assessment literate—in terms of promoting and of documenting student learning. (p. 765)

We agree with Stiggins's suggestions. For preservice and inservice teachers, we offer the following recommendations, which may be useful when working toward achieving this balance.

Use multiple forms of assessment to gain a more comprehensive view of students' literacy skills. Most teachers are well aware that scores on high-stakes tests provide a limited view of students' reading and writing skills and offer insufficient information that can be used in making day-to-day instruction-

al and curricular decisions (Klingner, 2002; Serafini, 2000/2001). However, teachers may not realize that there are alternative assessments that can provide useful and more complete information about students' developing literacy proficiencies and skills. For instance, collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources over time can provide a more powerful tool for understanding students' interests, abilities, needs, and values. When teachers take deliberate steps to select and organize multiple artifacts representing student learning using portfolios, they are more likely to take time to review and reflect upon their students' literacy learning process and the growth it fosters (Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994).

Use culturally appropriate assessments, like the parent story interview, to learn about students' home-literacy knowledge. Based on the concept of cultural responsiveness (Au, 2006), parent stories provide a framework for collecting information about students' cultural experiences and traditions and for using this information in classroom teaching and learning. Parent stories are narratives gained from open-ended conversations or interviews. In these interviews, parents respond to questions designed to provide information about traditional and nontraditional early literacy activities and experiences in the home (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999). This rich information can help teachers to develop personal knowledge about families and children, understand students' culture, and orchestrate instructional strategies and activities that build upon their funds of knowledge.

Engage students in the assessment process. Although it may seem that assessment is an inherently student-centered process, Serafini (2000/2001) argued that "assessment has been something we do 'to' students rather than 'with' students" (p. 390). If we acknowledge that "assessment must serve students" (Farr, 1991, p. 95), then we must also begin to actively involve children in the assessment processes that typically occur in classrooms. Working with students to determine their self-perceived strengths and needs engages students in the assessment process while offering teachers new insights on children's thinking and growth.

Engage other school personnel in assessment and instruction inquiry through action research. Trying to achieve a balance between assessment of

and assessment for student learning in the classroom can seem daunting—particularly when teachers are already pressed for time. Individual teachers, however, should not feel as if they have to make this happen alone. Talking with other colleagues, such as grade-level leaders, reading specialists, and school administrators, may be a very productive step toward achieving a balance between meeting accountability demands and helping students become thoughtfully literate. In a previous Assessment column that appeared in *The Reading Teacher*, Mokhtari, Rosemary, and Edwards (2007) described a promising framework that can be used to support school teams (i.e., teachers, literacy coaches, data managers, and principals) in making sense of various types of assessment data for instructional planning.

Achieving a Balance

We hope that these suggestions will help more teachers to achieve the balance between assessments of and for learning and lead toward more accurate and complete understandings of students' literacy strengths and needs.

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