
Volume 2011

Number 26 *Toward Meaningful Assessment: Lessons
from Five First-Grade Classrooms*


Article 3

May 2011

Commentary

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Recommended Citation

Freeman, S. (2011). Commentary. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2011 (26). Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2011/iss26/3>

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Commentary by Susan Freeman

In Laura Kates' study, the experience of six first grade teachers with the ECLAS reading assessment reveals the complexity and contradiction often involved in translating mandated district policy into effective classroom practice. We are asked to consider whether teachers, faced with mandated assessments, are more or less likely to use the information these assessments yield to better understand their students' learning and their own classroom performance. Through the teachers' eyes, we see the impact of consequential validity in shaping their resistance to ECLAS in an era in which mandated assessments reduce children to numerical data and require teacher compliance rather than deep and meaningful professional inquiry. In exploring the teachers' social construction of what effective assessment is and isn't, Kates surfaces a disconnect between the design of ECLAS, the strategic thinking of those who mandate and enforce its implementation, and the expectations of the teachers who carry out the mandate in schools.

The study implies that ECLAS is at odds with its own sense of purpose. As Kates points out, quoting Michael Fullan, "...the link between cause and effect is difficult to trace...and paradoxes...abound." (Fullan, 1999). That linkage begins, in this case, with the intent of the mandate and works its way from there, influenced by a rigid district culture, the political climate surrounding it, and the self-perception teachers hold in relation to their role in the education of children. The teachers respond to a mandate that does not meet their experiential criteria for purposeful assessment in support of teaching and learning. They have collaboratively crafted and successfully used informal assessments, applying the data to instructional decisions. They are very clear that collegial inquiry and dialogue move their practice forward, aware that such an interplay of ideas makes a richer field for understanding the complex dynamics of the classroom. Yet the district ignores this history and demands their participation in perfunctory professional development that

focuses only on procedure and compliance. Underlying the teachers' response to ECLAS is a resounding dissonance between what the teachers know to be effective classroom practice and what the district expects them to deliver. Clearly, something has to change or be redefined in order for the district mandate to work.

Professional development sets the stage for teacher perception and learning, and contributes directly to what happens in the classroom. If it is structured and facilitated to allow open-ended exploration, teachers increase their knowledge and skills and students benefit. As with the design of assessment, the model and content of professional development need to match the outcomes we hope to attain.

One possible alternative exists in the example of an initiative I coordinated as part of a long-range shift in writing assessment practices in a California school district. The teachers in one K-5 school piloted a mandated writing assessment cycle. More than 75% of the students at this school were English Language Learners (ELLs) and the school's scores on standardized reading tests were the fifth lowest in the state. For two of the four years I worked there, the school was in Program Improvement under No Child Left Behind. Like their counterparts at P.S. 200, the teachers were initially on the defensive due to their direct experience with punitive mandated policies that sacrificed meaningful teaching and learning in the pursuit of politically-loaded scores. One major difference with this district mandate was that collegial inquiry was at the heart of the new assessment model.

We designed professional development to be holistic and relevant to the work of the classroom so it awakened a new perception of assessment situated in the process of teaching and learning. Teachers interacted at several levels to provide a deep, comprehensive approach intended to increase teacher knowledge and change attitude and practice. We met quarterly as a full staff to score and analyze the

district writing samples, and to articulate classroom practice and curriculum across the grades. In monthly grade level collaborations, we used student work as a starting place for reflection and analysis of the craft of writing, and mapped project-based writing into content area studies. Finally, one-on-one classroom coaching was scheduled throughout the year. Eventually, a voluntary, teacher-led professional learning community also evolved to support classroom action research, launch an innovative school-wide writing program, and share teachers' writing about classroom practice.

This model was intensive, yet once teachers realized the depth of insight and information they could glean from it, a spark was lit. The writing assessment cycle drove much of this work. Collaborative scoring and analysis of student writing made evident the relevance of the assessment, and was critical to increasing teachers' understanding of how students learn to be effective writers. It helped, of course, that the assessments were authentic measures of students' classroom performance. It also provided a structure through which to analyze any design flaws. This led to a district revision of the assessment instruments and generated a qualitative change in teachers' perception of the assessment by the final writing sample of the first year. Ongoing inquiry and dialogue allowed teachers to intelligently sustain the improvement of student literacy in their classrooms while creating a purposeful professional community, and within it, the possibility of profound and purposeful change.

Inquiry-based professional development gave the mandated assessment cycle a purpose that district leaders had not foreseen. Because teachers had collaboratively wrestled with assessment and classroom practice deeply enough to co-construct a collective understanding of the assessment cycle, they were able to evolve meaningful collective solutions to the challenges of school-wide improvement in literacy. And that led to an amazing shift in teachers' self-perception, and to their

district standing, as instructional leaders. After three years, the school, once seen as "failing", was removed from NCLB Program Improvement, its professional development program celebrated across the district as "the model every school should follow." This never would have occurred had professional development been focused on compliance rather than on teacher learning.

Returning to the narrative of the first grade teachers at P.S. 200 through the lens of this professional development model, how might their social construction of, and response to ECLAS have been altered by a more collaborative, inquiry-oriented approach? The pivotal issue here is one of perception, not only the teachers' perception of the assessment, but more vitally, the district's perception of the intent of the assessment, their expectations for how teachers will successfully carry out the mandate, and their misjudgment of the role professional development could play in bridging these endpoints.

The most cogent lessons learned from my experience in leading the school-wide assessment pilot were essentially rooted in the question of how key players' perceptions would shape the design, efficacy, and outcomes of the mandate. Everything hinged on the district setting clearly defined, attainable outcomes, putting forward a mandate that made sense to the teachers who had to implement it. By setting the intended outcomes in front of everything we did, we were able to identify what had to be done along the way to make them possible, including how to provide effective professional development that would encourage, rather than deter, teachers' participation and thinking. If the goals of district assessment are simply to collect scores, compare them across schools, and give prizes for the highest performance, then the need for teachers to construct a more nuanced understanding of assessment practices will probably not be seen by district leaders as a valuable use of teachers' time. But if sustainable improvement in student performance is the desired

outcome, we must see teachers at the center of the process to make assessment a relevant and purposeful part of teaching and learning.