Prior to being given this prompt, the students were asked to read the following article: McMillan, J. (2003). Understanding and improving teachers' classroom assessments: Decision making implications for theory and practice. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices, 22*(4), 34-43.

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| **Forum 6: Marking & Grading and Assessment Practices.***In his article, “Understanding and Improving Teachers‘ Classroom Assessment Decision Making: Implications for Theory and Practice,” McMillan describes some of his research on teachers’ grading practices. He asked teachers about the nature of their decision making in constructing classroom assessments and assigning grades. In particular, he examined the relationship between teachers’ internal belief and value systems and what assessment specialists claim are sound principals of assessment and measurement.**Reflect upon your own philosophy with respect to assessment, grading, and marking. Take into account any changes in your thinking that may have occurred, so far, during this course, as well as the Cross, et al. article. To what extent does your thinking agree or disagree with the McMillan’s findings? Try to be specific in your response. Show where you agree or disagree with the teachers in McMillan’s study.* |

*Students’ responses to this forum follow. The responses have not been edited. My response to the students’ posts are given at the end of the students’ response. You can jump to my response* [*HERE*](#OlsonsComments)*.*

Initial Reply by Keeley Smith Ward on February 24, 2012 at 8:22pm

I strongly believe that student performance on assessment should drive instruction. I also agree with McMillan that despite the knowledge and research that supports formative and summative assessments driving instruction, “…teachers continue to use assessments that measurement experts contend are not consistent with best practice.” (2003, p. 34). Fidelity with assessment processes is a work in progress.

Reflection should be a central focus for educators when analyzing assessments, yet how often do teachers take time to reflect on their daily instructional practices? Or dare I ask, have school leaders created a time and place for teachers to concentrate and complete this reflection? And after they reflect on their daily instructional practice, do they reflect on their formal and informal assessments?

Teachers need time to analyze their assessments (formal and informal), look at individualized student performance, create ways to engage students in analyzing their results, finding their strengths and gaps, and collaboratively creating steps to close the gaps through strategies and ideas during classroom instruction. McMillan says it best, “…it is meaningful to identify how teachers make decisions about doing assessment, how the results are used to evaluate learning, how positive feedback is given to students, and how instruction is changed” (2003, p. 35). When teachers do not understand this philosophy or how to complete these tasks, building leaders must design times and ways of helping them understand this process.

I also agree with many of the teachers’ comments in McMillan’s study. Accepting the responsibility as the teacher when students do not master assessment is crucial. One teacher stated, “To me grades are extremely secondary to the whole process of what we do. I have goals to what I want to teach and I use assessment so that I know what I need to work on” (2003, p. 37). Too often I hear the following: these kids are lazy, bad parenting, students don’t care, they need a beating, I’ll show them, or someone has to teach them responsibility. The focus needs to be taken off of the grade and/or personal attack on the students and placed on students’ individual needs.

Each child is exceptionally unique, and that is why teachers must closely scope each assessment for possible defects whether it is through the process they are using to give the assessment, bias, scoring, or variability (Popham, 2006, p. 139 & 169). When grades, zeros, and personality conflicts are set aside and the focus is placed on the criteria being taught, the process for motivating students to get them engaged, and understanding how each student learns, the students’ desire to grow and master the material will soar.

McMillan also mentions several times about outside forces (high stakes testing) controlling teacher assessment decisions. Multiple choice tests are practically forced on teachers through the pressure of performing high on these types of tests. Although I do believe that students need to learn multiple choice testing strategies and practice so that the format is not a shock to them, I still believe that if students are taught through data driven instruction and to their learning styles throughout most of the *year, they will learn the material and excel on the big state assessments.*

Reply by Amy C. Bland on February 24, 2012 at 9:09pm

I agree. If our focus is life long learning, then we should encourage the idea many of our professors have given to us. Start the students with an A; they just have to keep it by proving their knowledge and retention of concepts through quality work and examples of mastery.

Reply by Kendra Stewart on February 25, 2012 at 4:10pm

Keeley,

I agree, often I hear every excuse for students not making progress in a class. Frequently, one thing I see is teachers not demonstrating a variance in learning styles to teaching students the skill. Day after day teachers provide the same approach to the material. Do not get me wrong, there are those days that students are unmotivated in their work, but regulatory patterns of behaviors from a student needs to be looked by the teacher. Teachers need to make sure that they use diffrent approaches and best teaching practices to make the students want to learn and be actively engaged in the lesson. As teachers we should know that not all students have the same learning styles and when planning our instruction and assessments we need to take that into account. Teachers making sure students are given the opportunity to receive the skill in manner at which they demonstrate best understanding practices is important.

Kendra

Reply by Stephanie Wray on February 27, 2012 at 9:56am

Keeley,

I too thought about the Reflection piece of this puzzle and asked the same questions! As administrators, providing the time or making it a focus of PLCs is important because we would convey the importance of reflecting to our staff. However, like the lack of training in preservice programs when dealing with assessment...I feel preservice programs also do not prepare teachers to engage in this reflective practice. Some teachers do not reflect because they simply don't know the proper ways. Literature like the articles we've been reading will be helpful in this area!

Initial Reply by Pam Huffstetler on February 25, 2012 at 12:11pm

Since I have been out of the classroom for over 13 years, classroom assessment seems to have taken on a life of its own. In McMillan’s (2003) article, I found myself nodding my head in agreement when he discussed the external pressures of assessment. He does a great job of presenting internal categories and external factors that are fed into the mix that results in assessment decisions. I feel the external pressures created by high stakes testing are overwhelming. In classrooms at my school, and I am sure it appears in other classrooms throughout North Carolina, teachers are omitting authentic means of assessment in order to create standardized tests that are reflective of the End of Course tests format. We spend hours teaching students how to eliminate distracters by selecting the correct response instead of teaching the content students will be expected to know. I am sure that many teachers struggle with this. They want their students to do well on the End of Course test and feel it would be unfair if the students are not well prepared of the testing format. But do these summative assessments really tell us about real student learning?

According to McMillan (2003), teachers have difficulty explaining their own assessments and grading practices. I learned this last year when our district choose to implement a county wide grading policy. Most teachers were unable to see that a test grade, which counts 65% of a child’s average, does not have to be in the form of a standardized test. McMillan states that we all need to reconsider the way we assess. “What is needed is an understanding of how assessment and instruction are interwoven, with new conceptions about what assessment is and how it affects learning.” With a change like a district grading policy, I feel this would have been the perfect opportunity for in-service training where teachers spend time on understanding different assessment strategies and approaches as well as purposeful reflection. Teachers need to understand that assessment is part of reflective practice, used by reflective teachers to gather information necessary to make curricular decisions.

While reading an additional article on assessment by Barbara Davis, she discusses four functions of a test that I wanted to share. “Many teachers dislike preparing and grading tests, and most students dread taking them. Yet tests are powerful educational tools that serve as four functions. First, tests help evaluate students and assess whether they are learning what you are expecting them to learn. Second, well-designed tests serve to motivate and help students structure their academic efforts. Third, tests can help understand how successfully you are presenting the material. Finally, tests can reinforce learning by providing students with indicators of what topics or skills they have not yet mastered and should concentrate on" (2002).

 Reply by Kendra Stewart on February 25, 2012 at 4:27pm

Pam

I know at my school the external pressures create teachers that want their students to be exposed to what an EOG is going to look like. Most of the tests I see on Friday are multiple choice especially now that we are into the third nine weeks. It is funny how you mentioned the test taking strategies because I recently had one teacher state, “That the reason the fourth grade did so well on the EOG was because they are good test takers. They know nothing.” I find that a very bold statement and I know that the fourth grade teachers would find that very offending. Do you think that this statement is valid? What do you think?

Kendra

Reply by Regina Lynch on February 25, 2012 at 9:28pm

Pam,

I agree that high stakes testing has taking on a life of its own. Although teachers are no longer directly instructed to teach to the test, the pressures and expectation to conform are still there. I’ve always believed that if students are truly taught the content then test scores will come. The beast known as “test prep” has become the (s)kill and drill of the new millennium. Instead of trying to force classroom practices into the confines of high stakes testing, the focus should be changing the foundation of classroom assessment based on teacher beliefs, constructivist theories of learning and motivation, and the realities of the classroom (McMillan).

Initial Reply by Elizabeth Hackney on February 25, 2012 at 1:15pm

In the short six weeks we’ve been reading about the ways teachers should and do assess their students’ learning, I’ve found myself thinking about my own classroom. I’ve seen the classroom I want to have, the classroom as a principal I will want all my teachers to have, and then the classroom I currently have. In the articles we’ve read so far as well as the McMillan (2003) we’ve been looking at how “assessment and instruction should be seamless, each contributing to the goal of improved student learning.” Too often there is instruction that will lead to assessment but the two often work in isolation. As I’ve confessed several times this semester, I’ve been guilty from time to time (mostly in my beginning years) of committing the transgressions we’ve read about; however, even as I grew into a better teacher, and better assessor, I still did not put thought into “technical measurement concepts or principles” (McMillan, J., 2003, p. 39). Over the six weeks we have read about the importance of feedback time and time again. I’ve been reminded how important this is to our students in their learning process, and so I’ve made an active effort to give my students more feedback in class and in their assignments. As McMillan reminded us (p.39) and other articles have told us, effective feedback between students and teachers leads to feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment.

When looking at the five themes found in their surveys, I found myself nodding and agreeing with bits and pieces of all of them. Looking at the characteristics, I saw a timeline of my career emerge. When I began teaching the books I taught and the methods I used to assess them were based on the philosophy (or so I thought. But as I taught, my philosophies changes. As McMillan says, my “on the job experiences” changed how I planned and assessed in my class. I think it’s a mixture of my changing philosophy coupled with the current state of our school, but I seem to relate more with “pulling for students” and “promoting student understanding.” I offer a retest on all quizzes, and I accept late work up till the end of the quarter, but I only started doing this because when it became expected at our school. If I didn’t accept late work I would have no basis of seeing what they do and don’t know. The students also know that I will bug them until I get my work. Through the retests students who have a bad morning or just need another week to get the information to click, have an opportunity to show me what they know. This philosophy has changed over the years. In my first years, there were no retests, and after three days missing assignments became a zero with no hope of redemption. I quickly saw that a zero motivated no one, and students don’t all learn on the same pacing guide.

While I am pulling for them, I believe that I do this to help them show me what they understand and what they don’t. I hate that so many of my kids only care about the grade they receive on a paper. “How much of my grade is this worth?” and “What’s the lowest A” are my two least favorite questions. Since I don’t believe in busy work, or homework for the sake of homework, I try to make them see that each assignment is purpose, but their 16 so they don’t see it that way. My AP kids hit a wall the first quarter. They’re accustomed to worksheets and vocabulary lists. When I expect them to discuss and develop their ideas they stare blankly at me. I smiled when McMillan said teachers responded against multiple choice tests stating, “I would rather have free response because then they have to put down exactly what they know.” I’m sure I’ve said that before at parent conferences. Parents and kids love the multiple choice questions (probably for the same reason many teachers do); there is a clear right and wrong answer- no gray areas. Explaining the difference between an 8 (94) and a 9 (100) on a paper to a parent involves a great deal of gray.

Student motivation is clearly important, and I agree that teachers need better ways to monitor and evaluate student behaviors that show effort and motivation. It is often difficult to gage which students are and are not giving their best efforts on their work. McMillan (2001) points out that “most teachers use student effort when evaluating student work and calculating grades.” This has become a source of much debate in our school. As described in the article, our teachers are told that they cannot grade for effort just for right and wrong answers. I tend to agree that if the work presented in challenging and relevant, the students put more effort into it, and I am learning as I dialogue more with my students about their work (multiple types of feedback for work) that this feedback also provides motivation for them. Between drafts they are addressing the comments I’m making and are looking forward to what I have to say about their thoughts on the next draft. As the semester goes on, I believe more and more that I “can learn to evaluate the quality of [my] assessments by their effect on intrinsic motivation. (McMillan, J., 2003, p. 40). It is a slow learning process, but I’m seeing more responses from students in the small steps that I’ve taken so far.

Reply by Regina Lynch on February 25, 2012 at 9:39pm

Liz,

I see a picture of the classrooms I want for myself and for my future teachers too! I know where I want to go – I just don’t have the roadmap to take me there. This course has been a great start; it’s just up to me to keep it going. I would love to see longitudinal in-services dedicated to assessment, grading, and feedback and instituting practices that work seamlessly to improve student learning.

Reply by Stephanie Wray on February 27, 2012 at 9:58am

Liz, An important point you bring up...the discussion and feedback are key components to help motivate some students. According to all the research we've studied regarding formative assessment practices, the communication aspect is just as important as the task itself, an aspect that I fear many teachers are not practicing. But as you've noted, it can be beneficial to the motivation of students; therefore increasing their effort. If they know what to work on, they're more likely to try and improve!

Reply by Katherine Jones on February 27, 2012 at 2:37pm

Elizabeth,

I find it interesting that your feedback via dialogue and comments on papers is motivating your students. Because your conversations and comments address individual academic differences, your students see that you believe in them. I admire you for taking the time to write comments and provide multiple types of feedback for your students. This takes an effort on your part. Even though it is a slow process, it appears that your students are motivated by your efforts. I have a book of motivational quotes. You might like this one: “You cannot plough a field by turning it over in your mind." Author Unknown

Katherine

 Reply by Elizabeth Hackney on March 1, 2012 at 7:04pm

Their motivation is fueling mine. I like your quote; I'll have to add that to our board.

Reply by Pam Huffstetler on February 27, 2012 at 8:35pm

I am no longer in the classroom and throughout the last six weeks I have found myself wanting to get back in their and try these new ideas. It has definitely made me think about some things I could have done differently.

 Reply by Keeley Smith Ward on March 3, 2012 at 10:05am

Liz, I agree with your disgust in students being so focused on the grades instead of the learning. I believe this is something that will take time and will be a huge transition to get them to think differently. And I honestly do no think that we can fully change this unless we were to do away with grades and go strictly by rubrics and criteria on report cards. Yet, that's a complete vertical change because of the GPA focus in colleges.

Initial Reply by Olivia Byerly on February 25, 2012 at 3:33pm

Often teachers use assessments in their classroom as a way of ending an instructional unit. At the high school level, in particular, teachers tend to teach a chapter in the text book or a goal from the curriculum that may require two weeks of instruction, and then give a summative test to assign grades for that unit. After the tests are graded and shared with the students, they are filed away in a cabinet. McMillan (2003) contends that assessments within the classroom should occur “prior to, during, and after instruction” (p. 34). This course has definitely made me more aware of the need to use assessment results throughout an instructional unit as a guide to shape instruction and not just as a way to assign grades. Being at a small school, often it is impossible for courses to be divided into honors and standard levels. I have students that have been identified as learning disabled in mathematics in the same course as students who are academically gifted in mathematics. New graduation requirements call for all students to obtain 4 high school math credits in order to receive a high school diploma. Therefore, it is important to use assessment strategies and data to continuously monitor student progress and adapt instruction to ensure that all students are learning the necessary material as well as being appropriately challenged. Through reflections in the course, I have altered the way I assess. I do not always give an end-of-unit test, but rather use frequent quizzes, activities, and projects to monitor understanding, provide feedback, and reflect upon effective instructional strategies.

McMillan (2003) discusses the importance of assessment decision making as a tool for evaluating learning and changing instruction. Often these decisions are influenced by tensions between internal beliefs and values of teachers and external factors such as standardized testing, teachers and student accountability, and parental influence (McMillan, 2003). He also mentions the need for training in an effort to strengthen the abilities of teachers to be effective assessment decision makers (McMillan, 2003). I agree with the following teacher beliefs regarding assessment as outlined in the study.

“Pulling” for students to help them succeed: Students should be given credit for trying. In mathematics, some students may struggle to successfully solve challenging problems. They should be rewarded for their attempt to complete the problem, which will motivate them to try. Grading decisions should be made based on the belief that, “it is best if all students are successful” (McMillan, 2003, p. 38).

Importance of promoting student understanding: The teachers in this article discuss their preference for using constructed-response assessments. One teacher regards them as, “most valuable for informing me about how much students know. Because it’s then that you know that they understand every process” (McMillan, 2003, p. 37). While I sometimes include multiple choice formatting, I too prefer constructed-response items. In mathematics, it is important to see the logical sequencing of student work. It is also too easy for students “plug in” the answer choices or guess the correct multiple choice answer. Multiple choice test items are not the best resources to evaluate instructional strategies or yield valid inferences.

Importance of active student engagement and motivation: One teacher in the article states, “Students learn more when students are actively engaged” (McMillan, 2003, p. 37). The method of traditional lecture is not effective all the time. Instructional strategies must be varied to involve students in the learning process, especially in a 90 minute class period. One area that I am seeking to improve upon in my instruction is the active involvement of students in assessment through the use of self-evaluation strategies.

McMillan (2003) describes motivation and effort as “primary influences” in teacher’s assessment decision making (p. 39). Teachers at my school seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable with how to assess and incorporate grades for student motivation and participation. Discussions and collaboration with colleagues could help to identify ways to incorporate these two important factors into the grading process. Many teachers base grades solely on student performance on tests and quizzes, with complete disregard to participation, or motivation. For some, it is easier to justify a grade to parents and students if they have the evidence of test and quiz grades for support. Many high school students are grade-driven. They want every assignment to be graded in an effort to boost GPA and class rank. Often parents share in this belief as well. Students have been conditioned to think this way, and may feel disappointed when a paper is returned with only feedback and no grade. It will take time to transition away from this way of thinking about assessment and grades. Effective assessment decision making balances external demands such as high-stakes standardized testing with the important internal contributions of students and teacher feedback.

Reply by Brian Lewis on February 26, 2012 at 8:57pm

Olivia,

This class has definitely made me rethink the way I assessed my students as a teacher. I did do some informal assessments throughout a unit but I did not think of assessing students to the caliber that our articles describes. I used assessments just as you described, a way to assign grades. I never gave a pretest to assess my students so I never really had a true gage of how much I actually taught them.

Now that I am on the other side of the fence as an assistant principal, I am seeing more of what you are talking about with students and parents being “grade-driven”. Now that the Spring semester is has reached its 1st progress report period, I am amazed at how many parents I listen to complaining about a teacher and how this one assignment is going to affect their student’s class rank.

Reply by Stephanie Wray on February 27, 2012 at 10:01am

Olivia,

I think you discussed an important point...teachers should be assessing before, during, and after instruction - and like you said, many teachers do not...they just give the "end" test, grade it, and file it away. With all we have read recently about formative assessment strategies, I feel many of the problems our students face with effort and motivation might be alleviated somewhat if teachers are providing that constant assessment and feedback throughout the unit of study, rather than just a "grade" at the end.

Reply by Pam Huffstetler on February 27, 2012 at 8:45pm

I was at a CDC district meeting last week where one CDC was talking about a teacher being absent for over a week and having to create lesson plans. I cringed when she said, "I have told the sub just to have them read the chapter and answer the questions at the end". She then made questions for the chapter through a test item bank, which was used as a test. I talked to her about different methods of assessing the students, taking what I have gained from this class, i.e. Small group discussions, each student coming up with two questions, and critical thinking maps. She seemed to appreciate the ideas.

Initial Reply by Misti Holloway on February 25, 2012 at 3:50pm

Decision-making guides effective teaching, instructional practices, and assessment procedures. McMillan (2003) encourages educators to practice purposeful reflection and insightful decision-making to gain awareness of how their beliefs concerning learning impact instruction, as well as student performance and comprehension, in their classrooms.

Reflection is imperative if teachers’ assessment practices are going to accurately influence instruction and insightful decision-making for improved student learning. According to Popham (2006), appropriately constructed assessments, in particular, encourage more engaging instruction: “Educational leaders will find that tests, if properly conceptualized, with instruction in mind, can prove enormously helpful in promoting more effective teaching” (p. 172). Recognizing that assessment activities occur before, during, and after instruction, as well as considering the evaluation tools utilized in their classrooms, can assist teachers in understanding how their testing practices impact student learning. Understanding reliability, validity, and test bias directly influence how teachers perceive fairness in assessment practices and instruction; this knowledge also guides how teachers interpret student work and form their own philosophies of education.

While McMillan (2003) discusses the struggle between teachers’ internal beliefs and external pressures and how this conflict influences their evaluation practices, he further acknowledged that many educators revealed an absence of appropriate training and understanding in classroom assessment procedures. For me, this insightful discussion was quite applicable to my experience as a classroom teacher. While I offer various assessment formats, preparation opportunities, instructional activities and feedback/revision possibilities, the relationship between my testing practices and teaching procedures are related to my own experience as an educator, not any training I have received as a result of professional development sessions in my school system. I can recall ONE workshop regarding adapting our current grading practices that highlighted abolishing the use of zeros. I also remember the loud complaining of my colleagues (myself included) and our obstinacy at the mere consideration of revising our grading practices and beliefs.

While I agree with McMillan’s (2003) revelation of how external pressures, particularly tension concerning high-stakes testing, I also believe teachers have the power to decide whether they will allow EOCs and EOGs to determine how they instruct and assess in their classrooms. I often hear complaints of having to “teach to the test”, but I still contend that is a personal and/or a professional choice. I understand that district leaders or administrators may dictate how teachers approach preparing students for these high-stakes assessments, but educators always have a choice. Too often, teachers have excuses or demonstrate unwillingness to attempt an educational revolution in their teaching practices.

Throughout the past six weeks, our readings have encouraged me to reflect upon my own practices as a teacher. Over the last ten years, my philosophy of education, teaching practices, grading beliefs, and assessment procedures have changed dramatically as my experience in the classroom increased. Through our class readings, I have begun the process of examining the tests and quizzes I use in my classroom for bias, fairness, reliability, and validity. My examination has encouraged several revised versions of my assessments. For too long, I have been the victim of ignorance where testing is concerned, but no longer can I use the excuse of not knowing better. Now that I do, change is on the horizon.

Reply by Olivia Byerly on February 26, 2012 at 6:15pm

Misti,

I agree with your belief that teachers should not let the pressures of state mandated testing influence the way in which they teach or assess. Teachers can still effectively prepare students for multiple-choice tests without conforming their classroom practices to "fit" the test at the end of the year. One example that comes to my mind involves a teacher that allows students to do "re-writes." All tests in the class are multiple choice. When a test is graded and returned, the students have a chance to re-write the question and correct answer of the items that they missed. They study the correct answers and then are allowed to re-take the test. I am not sold that this practice is effective. It seems that students are basically being trained to memorize correct multiple choice answers and reproduce them from their short-term memory. While the teacher gets great end-of-course test results, the students probably do not retain any of the information after finishing the class. This instructional and assessment practice is based solely the pressures of high-stakes testing. What are your thoughts?

Reply by Misti Holloway on February 26, 2012 at 11:55pm

Olivia,

I actually allow my students to correct missed test items to earn back half credit. While I do not offer the opportunity to retake a test or quiz, I do allow my students to correct these missed items to improve their overall grade as well as to understand why they missed that particular question. My tests all involve true/false, multiple choice, matching, short answer, and essay questions. Using various formats on each test allows students to be assessed on information in a multitude of ways so they are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge on the material, not just their ability to memorize the information. I am not saying the way we do things in my classroom is the right process, but I feel like my students are learning.

Oftentimes, I think teachers and administrators can get preoccupied with proficient scores on high stakes assessments, and we forget how to vary learning activities. Projects, presentations, and other learning activities are opportunities for teachers to assess students and even prepare them for high stakes assessments without "teaching to the test".

Reply by Olivia Byerly on February 27, 2012 at 5:22pm

Misti,

I definitely see value in allowing students to correct missed test items as well as varying test formats. Your philosophy differs drastically from the example I wrote about where the students were memorizing correct answers only to reproduce them again. You are correct-students should understand "why" they miss a question on a test.

The comment about "teaching to the test" is so true. I have often heard teachers say, "I don't have time for projects or activities in my class. I have an EOC to prepare for." How misled we have become as educators because of the pressures of high-stakes testing. Thanks for the insight.

Reply by Elizabeth Hackney on February 26, 2012 at 9:51pm

Misti,

I think you make a good point. Acknowledging the tensions teachers face in the classroom is important, but helping teachers see past them so as to not use them as a crutch is equally important. Teachers (and even students) complain about teaching to the test, but I always think of it as I'm teaching the information that will be on the test. And now, we know how to make sure the test is testing the information we've been teaching

Initial Reply by Regina Lynch on February 25, 2012 at 4:27pm

Do you know how chaos ensues when you’re in the midst of a home improvement project or other large scale venture? That is where I currently am with my own philosophy on assessment, grading and marking. At the beginning of this semester I weighed student ability, individual responsibility, effort, and academic growth pretty equally. Yes, a hodgepodge. So now I am left with the question of how do I, after more than a decade, totally transform the way I assess and grade? How would I as a school leader develop a school wide practice of sound assessment and grading decision making? I have a picture of what it should look like, but how and where would you start??

As a teacher, I can relate to “the difficulties that arise when teachers (attempt to) serve as both (student) advocate and judge” (Cross, et al). The space that lies between pulling for students and perpetuating classroom assessment and grading policies that are “victims of gross neglect” can be a minefield. I try to mediate “always trying to find some ways so that all the children can find success” (Italics added, McMillan) and providing a “robust education” that will help reach my goal of promoting student understanding. I have proudly used constructed-response assessments, believing that they are best “for informing me about how much students know” (McMillian). That’s me in my role as judge. I have also tried to avoid overreliance on multiple choice assessments in lieu of what I believed were ‘more authentic’ measurements like short response and performance based assessments. As a student advocate I constantly questioned these types of assessments in relation to individual differences. I would create multiple forms of the same assessment (2 or 3, never more) and then my grading of those assessments were influenced “on the basis of perceived differences in student characteristics” (Italics added, McMillan). Before this semester I never considered the validity and impact of these perceptions.

Then, the judge kicks in. Although I do believe in pulling for students, I have advocated against the practice of making up or earning bonus points. In my opinion this practice would diminish student motivation and accountability. Why, from a student’s perspective, should you exert any undo effort when make-up and bonus points could replace study and hard work? Although I agree with the principles behind the practice, a more effective assessment practice would be more formative in nature, allowing student performance to drive instruction which in turn would lead to another assessment and so on (Guskey, 2003; Popham, 2009; Stiggins, 2003).

Assessment decisions seem easier to address than grading decisions. To cite my initial course survey, in my elementary and middle school experiences we were not allowed to give zeros; the lowest grade we could assign was a 60 and 50 respectively. I have always and still do vehemently disagree with this policy as I believe it reinforces a lack of responsibility and ownership, and propels the false sense of entitlement so many youths seem to have. It seems that a zero is appropriate when a student blatantly and willingly fails to complete an assignment. Judge. They are not appropriate when environmental factors or unforeseen circumstances prevent the student from completing the work.

While my grading practice and policies have been a hodgepodge, I don’t believe that “grades are extremely secondary to the whole process of what we do.” I view grades a one component of the assessment process, a process that should work in tandem with instruction, yet find it virtually impossible not to let outside situations and home environments impact grading. I don’t give a participation grade simply because it seems too subjective and, depending on individual differences, not an appropriate measure of academics. Still, it’s hard to reconcile the fact that growth, ability, effort are considered “non-academic”, especially given the enormous influence that these factors can have over student achievement. When I taught 9th grade English I all but gave up on homework with some of my students. Some students really do have situations that make homework all but impossible. As I’ve gained experience, I have found ways to accommodate during the school day. I’ve had working lunches with students (yes, they enjoy my company enough for this not to feel like punishment). I’ve worked around bus schedules and have given rides home. The students were willing to accept my help and that’s half the battle. I can’t imagine that I would have gotten the same level of cooperation if my grade formulation weighed heavily on the miscalculation that homework = worksheets + practice (to infinity and beyond).

In my experience the moral component of grading is far less prevalent at the secondary level. I believe that this is one factor that contributes to students dropping out in 10th, 11th and 12th grade. To adult on-lookers it seems unbelievable that a student would work towards a 14 year goal of graduation then drop out with 3 years or less left. But when we look at the types of students who drop out and the home, environmental, psychosocial and intellectual factors common among high school dropouts, it is reasonable to assume that these are the types of students who likely benefitted from morally-driven grading practices in the lower grades. I don’t agree with the perception that the secondary level is the “time when the need for clarity of meaning is the greatest” (Cross, et. al). It’s seems just plain wrong to incorporate the moral component in the lower grades, giving the students and their parents a false impression (invalid inference) of the students’ academic achievement and ability and then do a 180 at the secondary level. I believe that school leaders and the assessment community will have to work in tandem to ensure that grades at every level “communicate as objectively as possible the (student’s) levels of educational attainment” (Cross, et. al).

Initial Reply by Brian Lewis on February 25, 2012 at 5:44pm

Effective teachers are ones that constantly assess students to determine what level of comprehension they have throughout a lesson or unit. This is something I had as a classroom teacher to a certain extent but now I see now there was a lot of room for improvement. I would prepare a good lesson plan for the day and try my best to complete it so I could stay as close as possible to my pacing guide for the year. I constantly felt pressure as a classroom teacher for my students to perform well on their End of Course Test. Obviously staying right on my pacing guide did not happen every day, but I made a conscious effort to complete the planned instruction, sometimes loosing focus on the needs of my students. This is one area where I could have performed better as a teacher by using the data I assessed and made better decisions to slow down and re-teach material if necessary. McMillan stated in “Understanding and Improving Teachers’ Classroom Assessment Decision Making: Implications for Theory and Practice” (2003, p.35) that the decision making process of whether or not to teach from the planned instruction after assessing students was crucial for effective teachers. I agree with 100%. If a student does not grasp fundamental concepts, future learning will not be able to build off of the initial foundations or concepts. Teachers’ philosophy of teaching and their teaching methods are directly tied to six themes categorized by McMillan: teacher beliefs and values, classroom realities, external factors, decision making rationale, assessment practices, and grading practices.

Throughout the article, examples were given about how teachers did not like multiple choice questions even though they made tests more uniform and standardized. Teachers did not feel multiple choice assessments gave an accurate account of student comprehension. I agree with this process of thinking because elimination of answers down to an educated guess is not the type of comprehension I looked for as a teacher. I wanted a demonstration of their understanding by giving specific examples relevant to what we were learning and a demonstration using a skill set they had learned from the lesson. A multiple choice, no matter how well thought out or analyzed, is going to give this much feedback from a student’s comprehension. I also used various forms of assessments allowing them to demonstrate their comprehension (i.e. Constructing a video demonstrating comprehension and uploading it to YouTube as a “How to Video”, creating a virtual poster using download pictures, videos, and hyperlinks as a visual tool for concept mapping, among several others).

I disagree to some degree about McMillan’s findings on Decision-Making Rationale. I know my data is extremely limited compared to the extensive research McMillan conducted, but the teachers I asked about their grading practices and reasoning behind those practices seemed well thought out. The part I feel I disagree with is possibly more the tone and not the content. Teachers’ grading preferences are highly individualized, but I felt as though McMillan’s research thought this was a negative. I feel it is a positive because it gives more freedom for diversified assessments and does not limit the teacher to a specific method that may or may not fit the needs of their students. Although some of the teachers I asked focused their grading tactics primarily on numerical value alone with everything weighing the same percentage, most grade their students utilizing some form of participation (or engagement as McMillan states). Homework varied depending on the class but actual classroom assessment, such as quizzes, labs, or class projects, reflected the greatest percentage of their students’ grades. This indicates to me that rationale was put into their grading train of thought reflecting the majority of time working and learning instead of a summative assessment reflecting the highest percentage of the students’ grades.

In conclusion, I agree that teachers need to be trained to analyze, interpret, and recognize appropriate evidences demonstrating student learning. Bloom’s revised taxonomy introduces instructional strategies that will help to parallel instruction with cognitive processes (McMillan, 2003). If teachers’ values and decision making judgments are going to account for how we assess student learning, then formal training on a regular basis is needed. Teachers get in a “rut” and forget about various methods to assess their students. Professional development (even though it is initially protested and despised by teachers) will help teacher become life long learners and positively influencing classrooms across America.

Reply by Olivia Byerly on February 26, 2012 at 6:22pm

Brian,

I think it is great that you took the time to ask teachers at your school about their assessment practices. This dialogue will allow you to gain insight into the grading policies and assessment strategies that are being used. As you point out, grading preferences are highly individualized. However, it is good for administrators to be aware of these practices.

Initial Reply by Tracee McManus on February 25, 2012 at 6:25pm

The McMillan article was an article that forced me to be very reflective on my practice as a teacher regarding assessment and grading. “It is sometimes argued that assessment and instruction should be seamless, each contributing to the goal of improved student learning” (McMillan, 2003). When I began this course, I believed that assessment should drive instruction. After being in this course a few weeks, I believe this even stronger. To me, classroom assessment is more important for determining how and what a teacher should teach versus it being solely used as a method for determining grades. McMillan also stated, “effective teachers practice purposeful reflection by being aware of how their theories and beliefs about learning interact with sociocognitive academic and nonacademic events and cues in particular context.” Currently, I am serving in a Central Office position. I have reflected more on my teaching practices since I left the classroom than I ever did while I was in the classroom. Observing teaches on a daily basis has encouraged me to evaluate what I did that was and was not effective for my students. It sometimes seems like teachers are often in “survival” mode, and they take little time to reflect on why they are doing what they are doing. Why are certain grades given? How much of a grade is determined by effort? How do I determine if a child is giving effort? Through McMillan’s article it was evident that teachers rarely use technical measures or concepts in their decisions regarding classroom assessment. Teachers want to ensure students have opportunities for success. “Pulling” for students was one aspect McMillan examined in the article. This related to teachers doing whatever it takes for students to succeed. I will honestly admit I have always done this as a teacher. However, through this class, I have seen that wanting my students to succeed is really a direct reflection on how I see myself. If my students do not succeed, I feel like I have not succeeded as a teacher. Another aspect of the article I decided to focus on was how high-stakes tests are completely against teachers’ methods for assessment. There was discussion about teachers giving multiple-choice tests to prepare students for a standardized test, even though this is not how the teachers prefer to assess students. This was an external factor that influenced classroom assessment. It truly amazes me that so much research has been completed over the years on alternative forms of assessment and modern ways to instruct students. Yet, high stakes testing has not transformed. McMillan is completely correct in his challenge for high stakes testing to match teacher classroom assessment practices.

Initial Reply by Kevin Spainhour on February 25, 2012 at 8:22pm

Teaching is personal. Those of us with school-aged children understand this. We, as teachers, might be able to turn a blind eye to the influence of internal beliefs and the affect that our bias has on our classroom. However, without fail, when our own child is awaiting their teacher assignment for 1st grade we are completely invested in the quality of teaching our child will receive. Many times, the quality of teaching in a parents’ eye is in direct proportion to the values and internal belief system that we perceive is demonstrated in the classroom. Parents want their “little precious” in a classroom that is led by a teacher that is enthusiastic, motivating, and seeks out the best in every student. Any good parent would want that for their child. In McMillan’s article (2003) the concept of a teacher’s internal factors is discussed. The explanation many teachers gave for their assessment/grading practices were dependent on these internal factors. Factors such as: teacher philosophy, motivation, promoting understanding, accommodating individual differences, and pulling for the students (p.36).

In the high stakes testing environment that our educators are surrounded by, I find it satisfying that in large part external factors are still not driving teachers’ decisions. However, the reality is that state mandated tests and accountability standards that rely on high stakes testing data play a definite role in a teacher’s decision-making. As one Virginia teacher commented, “I give them more multiple choice so they can get used to it” (McMillan, 2003, p.37). The ability of teachers to recognize these factors through reflection offers self-awareness and enhances teaching methods in relation to assessment and grading (McMillan, 2003).

In my experiences, I agree with McMillan when he concludes, “it is the nature of the context that influences assessment decision making” (p.38). The coach in me has always been a motivator and found myself “pulling” for students. However, I rarely accept late work due to my “old-school” mentality of teaching responsibility. Too often with Healthful Living classes, the material is not the cause for frustration with students. Instead, it is the discipline to actually remember that PE is a class as well. I believe that holding students accountable for making the effort to complete assignments is vital in my classroom. I grade assignments on completion practically 100% of the time. Effort is essential yet I understand that my situation is quite different than a regular classroom teacher that has EOCs looming at the end of the semester. Being a physical education teacher, encouraging more effort by students is a daily chore. Grading effort is more clear-cut for me than in the traditional c­­lassroom. Effort, as indicted throughout our readings, is important. As McMillan (2003) suggests, teachers needs to be able to identify behaviors that indicate effort. Brookhart (1997) introduced the concept of categorizing effort into two types: mental and overt. Mental effort rates how hard the student tries while overt effort is the amount of actual work being completed. At the high school level, there are many teachers that separate an effort into a grade, which figures in as a percentage of the student’s overall grade. This “participation” grade as it is often coined many times includes homework, class involvement, practice problems, etc. The struggle is being able to quantify effort for each student. Finding the proper balance and being able to assess effort within the context of the classroom allows teachers to find the potential in all students. We need a shared belief of teachers that is explained by a teacher in the McMillan (2003) article, “to me grades are extremely secondary to the whole process of what we do. I have goals to what I want to teach and I use assessment so that I know what I need to work on” (p.37).

Reply by Amy C. Bland on February 26, 2012 at 4:25pm

I can relate to your comment about parents and expectations with our own children. It is interesting to view the world from the parent's perspective.

Reply by Brian Lewis on February 26, 2012 at 9:09pm

Kevin,

I agree with the coaching mentality. I think some students will give more effort for a teacher/coach because of their "pulling" for the students. It is our nature as coaches to Win, Win, Win and we push our students in a little different way than a traditional teacher. I am not saying anything bad about teachers who are not coaches but their just seems to be a different bond between teachers who coach and the motivation they instill in their students. I don't think I am doing a good job of describing the Teacher/Coach relationship for motivating their students and I hope I do not offend anyone because that is not my intent at all. I just feel there is a different bond.

Reply by Katherine Jones on February 27, 2012 at 3:02pm

Brian and Kevin,

Yes, there is a different bond. It can be a very strong bond. My son and daughter both played sports in middle school and high school. Both of them have a strong bond with a particular coach. I am thankful that they were able to have this strong bond because it motivated them to do their best on and off the court.

Katherine

Initial Reply by Kendra Stewart on February 25, 2012 at 9:01pm

When thinking about the assessment process in reference to my job as a special education teacher I have difficulty. Some of my students are on an alternative EOG, but when given their regular classroom tests or assessments the teachers do not provide alternative testing. When making the decision to put a student on the alternative EOG test the IEP team reviews the student’s current abilities. After review of student abilities one important factor is the student must be at least two grade levels behind. McMillan brought up a good point that essentially teachers want to give students the best opportunities to succeed and adopting assessment and grading practices to provide such opportunities is imperative (pp. 36-37). At my school it makes me ponder if these test opportunities are given to my students. Are my students provided with a fair chance with their assessments and tests when they are already two grade levels behind? I have never thought about my teachers having an alternative form to their classroom assessments and tests.

When viewing grading and marking some of my students receive modified grading on their assignments and their report cards which also is controversial. These modifications are factors that impact the nature of the classroom grading (p.37). When providing modifications my teachers use their own personal judgment when determining student’s variances for grading and modifications. Teachers that have these students often struggle how to determine the rationale of their grading practices not only for the choice in the task but also the choice in how to adapt according to the students IEP. I personally do not provide modified grading to students, but prefer modified assignments. The reason for this choice modified grading, teachers own beliefs and values will contribute to the decision making process. When given modified assignments, the student still needs to perform the task along with their peers but without grade deviation needing to be calculated.

My thinking in reference to McMillan findings is that I agree with his view points in his article on his classroom realities, external factors, and teacher influences. I also agree that the decision making rational for assessments can be difficult. As teachers, we need to take into account that traditional families are not the standard norm of society or for our students in schools. Many students and teachers have several factors that contribute to decision making practices and performances. McMillian discussed several in his article that I believe are true such as state mandated high stakes testing, district policies and requirements, and parents (pg. 37).

Teachers in his article had a lot of valid points that affect assessment and instructional decision making practices. McMillian stated that teachers need time to reflect on their classroom assessment and instructional decision making in order to have direct relevance on how to make interpretations and draw conclusions (p. 39). I agree teachers need to have time to evaluate student learning and determine how to move forward in their instruction. This is something I find difficult due to the academic rigor demands of 21st century, but is essential to the success of my students.

Initial Reply by Regina Lynch on February 25, 2012 at 9:11pm

Keeley,

I don’t think many school leaders have created the time and space necessary for reflection. I often hear classroom teachers state how overwhelmed and inundated they feel with outside pressures and tasks that have little if anything to do with the realities of their classrooms. It’s not uncommon for teachers to be pulled from workdays, planning periods and even summer vacation to prescribe to the latest and greatest one size fits all panacea for all school ails, a.k.a a standardized test scores in a box. I think a lot of the hope in school reformation lies in the teachers and school leaders who are getting trained on assessments that are consistent with best practice.

Reply by Amy C. Bland on February 25, 2012 at 10:02pm

Regina,

I agree the words, " we don't have enough time" seems to hold true. Teachers need times to plan, align, and create assessments. Even if educators want to reform and change mindsets of assessment, time is still a factor or lack thereof.

Reply by Jessica Gilway on February 26, 2012 at 11:50am

I also think that we as administrators need to fight for them to have the time and structure in the time for meaningful conversations whenever we are able. We need to fight to preserve their precious workdays and planning periods to do meaningful work. I know when I taught 7 preps last year - three different science courses, three Spanish courses and one social studies courses - I struggled to do even the most basic assessments. I shifted almost completely to day-to-day formative assessment on the spot because I was out of time to do big grading. I put some of the work back on the student also and asked them to critique themselves and to critique each other based on rubrics we created together. Even with all of their help, there was still not enough time. I think we need to focus on working smarter, not harder and doing more with less, rather than just doing more and piling more on. Otherwise, good teachers leave because they feel ineffective. I know I felt ineffective last year and it was hard. I also knew I was doing the best I could with what I had. I needed my administrator or an instructional coach to come and in and start a conversation about the reality of my classroom and what is was reasonable to accomplish. I needed a supportive dialogue based on problem-solving and meeting the needs of all students. I agree that we need to prioritize training for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Reply by Elizabeth Hackney on February 26, 2012 at 10:03pm

7 preps! While I'm proud of you for making it through that schedule, I can't imagine taking it on. You definitely needed someone in your corner fighting to protect your schedule. How can you have had the time to handle all those plans, papers, and pupils straight while giving them the time the deserve?

Reply by Jessica Gilway on February 28, 2012 at 11:24pm

Elizabeth,

I only did it for one year. And now there is a first year teacher in that classroom. Can you imagine having that load as a first year teacher. Pretty wild! It makes assessment a bear. You really do have to work smarter. I believe after having done it that there is not enough time in the day to do it all.

Initial Reply by Amy C. Bland on February 25, 2012 at 9:58pm

I believe teachers need to use a variety of ways to evaluate students. Methods that work for one teacher may not work for another. Assessments should match the material that has been taught and aligned appropriately with the curriculum and also with other team members. Common assessments are created among team members that are reflective on the skills demonstrated by students among classrooms in the grade levels. With the goal in mind to improve student learning, teachers can more often take on the newness of the concepts of assessments (McMillian, 2003, p.34).

Also I believe that a student should be given opportunity to respond to opportunities to erase zeros. However this is only one of the aspects of grading. According to a teacher mentioned in the article this week, it is important for all children to feel success (McMillian, 2003). In regards to homework, providing choices of assignments, children feel a sense of accomplishment and ownership to complete the assigned tasks.

Students that are actively involved in their own learning processes become very skilled at self-assessment (McMillian, 2003). By using formative assessments daily, children are also more actively involved as well. During self-assessments, students ask questions and are increasingly more verbal (McMillan, 2003). “It is not about grading but the process of learning (McMillan, 2003, p. 38).

Teachers who practice this way of assessment also submit effort as only a portion of the grade. Homework is also a lesser portion of the grade overall. I am not in agreement with Dewey’s the more the better practice. Effort towards completion is also assessed in a case of weekly homework. I feel the students can practice ten problems and not neccesarily thirty on the same topic in a night. It is the quality of the assignments that produce quality work not quantity.

According to the article by McMillan (2003), additional staff development is needed for new staff. The more contemporary but classis Formative assessment is only part of the process. The ability to create a unified common assessment is a key for implementation.

Reply by Kendra Stewart on February 28, 2012 at 10:54pm

Amy

I find that when given the opportunity my students love to have multiple choices to show their knowledge of the content that they have been taught. Also as you mentioned ten problems instead of thirty on the same night can demonstrate the practice needed with the skill. I agree it should be quality not quantity of the work. I do not like it when teacher also give busy work either to students, the student need to have a purpose to their work to get the most out of the school day.

Kendra

Initial Reply by Stephanie Wray on February 25, 2012 at 11:58pm

My own philosophy has undergone a few renovations since I started out in this business over a decade ago. As a novice teacher in second grade, I did like many teachers in McMillan’s study and received a good bit of “on the job training” when making assessment and grading decisions. I received advice from more experienced teachers and I also did a lot of “pulling for the students” and factored effort and motivation into my grades a great deal. After two years of teaching second grade, I moved to fifth grade…a “testing” grade…and entered a whole new world of grading and assessment. The tension, noted by McMillan, between what I believed to be best practices plus external factors such as high-stakes testing and classroom realities began to pull on my decisions. Several of the teachers’ comments in McMillan’s study caught my attention…either because I agreed or disagreed with them, and have experienced similar thoughts in my classroom:

 “I give them more multiple-choice tests so they’ll be used to the format…” I disagree with this practice. Teaching a “testing” grade, I too have done this and I look back now and feel that I offered somewhat of a disservice to the students in my classroom at the time. The tension introduced by high-stakes testing caused me, and many teachers, to “teach to the test” which McMillan says (and I agree) can lead to inflated student achievement.

 “There are kids who have certain situations at home and I’ll give breaks for that…” Again, disagree. But I also used to do it. I used to take into consideration that some students had more help at home and some did not; therefore grades might be different based on my judgment of what might be happening at home. However, toward the end of my years in the classroom I made the decision to just not grade any homework! If a student did not do the homework and I felt there was a situation at home that was contributing to it, I would dig a little deeper – with my students – to try and remedy the situation. But I finally relinquished the notion to grade homework altogether. I came to the realization that there were factors out of my control (and the students’) and it was not fair to grade this work; nor to give extra points…sometimes.

 “To me grades are extremely secondary to the whole process of what we do. I have goals of what I want to teach and I use assessment to know what I need to work on. Agree! This statement is where I think I am now. Toward the end of my years in the classroom, I began to do this kind of reflective practice and this is what I believe teachers should engage in now. “Grades” and “assessment” are truly different in my mind, and I believe teachers need to discuss and reflect upon some of the questions and training ideas suggested by McMillan in order to relieve some of the tension teachers feel when making grading and assessing decisions.

The three comments above somewhat show the progression in my philosophy. I used to think that I should conform to how other people grade and prepare students to take the tests…then I moved into thinking about how some students don’t have the same opportunities as others and reluctantly took that into consideration…but finally have moved into a more reflective practice. I finally came to the understanding that formative assessment practices may be the most beneficial to my students and I viewed grades as secondary factors. McMillan points out that helping teachers understand how to balance the demands of external factors and constraints with their own beliefs and values to determine classroom assessment practices is key.

Reply by Amy C. Bland on February 26, 2012 at 4:31pm

I am embarrassed to say that I too have used quite a few textbook ready made tests in my early years as well. I do feel differently now about assessment. For homework/ projects, I have to say, I always feel for the child who obviously did the assignment him/herself. To walk in the door, and see this elaborate project brought from home from a child who obviously didn't do the work him/herself. That child did not participate as actively in the process and the product was of great quality. However, the parent deserved an A for the work produced.

Reply by Stephanie Wray on February 27, 2012 at 10:04am

You are right! As I grew in the profession and changed some of my views, I tried to stress to students (and parents) that a project doesn't get a better grade just because it looks better. It is not the fault of the student if parents are not able to help and make it "picture perfect" and I would almost see a project that looks entirely done by student hands than one that looks too good to be true :)

Reply by Brian Lewis on February 26, 2012 at 9:23pm

Stephanie,

I too would look at the way other teachers graded their students and would mirror that grading style. I see now that I was doing my students and injustice by “conforming to the mold” in my philosophy of just using assessments as a means to give my students grades. I am in a position now to help teachers see what we need to change and how we need to change our way of thinking.

Reply by Elizabeth Hackney on February 26, 2012 at 10:07pm

Reflection is such an important part of our profession, but we never seem to have enough time. It has been interesting this week to look back over the past few years and think about how we've changed as teachers. As I work with new teachers, I'm trying to remember where I was and how I can help them grow without telling them they're wrong or trying to change their spirit. I don't want them to conform to me anymore than I wanted to conform to the, shall we call them seasoned, teachers beside me when I started.

Initial Reply by Katherine Jones on February 26, 2012 at 12:43am

I found several aspect of McMillan’s research on teachers’ grading practices alarming. The article detailed the conflicts between teachers’ beliefs and values about certain aspects of assessment and the high-stakes testing system. I agreed with several points McMillan’s made in this article. However, I had reservations about certain teachers’ responses presented and disagree with their philosophies of grading practices. Several key concepts were presented that have an impact on classroom assessment. A major concern that I have is the teachers create their own assessments to replicate their state’s end of grade or end of course assessment.

The research findings that indicated many teachers implement their own belief and/or value system to construct assessment instead of measurement principles is disturbing. These teachers belief/value system appeared to be based on very general principles of teaching and learning (McMillan, 2003). I wonder how effectively these teachers evaluate educational tests that are administered to their students. This troubles me because there is a lack of emphasis on the value of formative assessment, assessment for learning, reliability, validity, and absence of bias. Popham (2006) states that three factors-validity, reliability, and absence of bias should always be applied when educational tests are being evaluated.

Shepard reminds educators that large-scale assessments are rarely used for improving instruction (McMillan, 2003). Yet, in education today, teachers feel pressure to create assessments to mirror assessments that are more like an EOG or EOC. One teacher in this article expressed this problem by saying, “The SOL tests defined the classroom assessment.” I prefer Stiggins approach in Assessment Crisis: The Absence of Assessment for Learning. Stiggins (2002) states that there is an importance of both assessment of learning and assessment for learning and he warns educators that there is not a balance. When teachers create assessments only to put emphasis on test-mandated test, they are failing to close the achievement gap and reach a majority of students under their supervision. There needs to be a balance between learning targets and the wide array of assessment opportunities available for teachers. Students have academic differences and assessments should address these differences. I strongly agree with Stiggins and Chappuis in Using Student-Involved Classroom Assessment to Close Achievement Gaps, “We must help students believe they are capable of succeeding and that success is worth the investment.”

In addition to finding some aspects of the research study disturbing, I also disagreed with several of the teachers’ responses in the article. First, the idea of “pulling” for students as a way to bring up their grades is not being fair to some students. Some students may be able to overcome obstacles if given the opportunity. Too often, teachers do not think outside of the box to solve problems for students with obstacles (such as a poor home situation). Teachers can find ways to work with student with a poor home life and still encourage high quality work. For example, helping students with homework during lunch, after school, or before school gives the student an opportunity to do their work instead of an excuse for not to their homework. These students cannot rise to their full potential if they are not given the opportunity to grow academically. I do believe that some students need modifications on assessments. However, the need for these modifications should be formally documented by a team of professionals. Another teacher’s response that bothered me was the statement: “I weigh more on homework…” Although the teacher did not comment on the types of data he/she collects to grade students, I am concerned that there is not enough data to draw accurate inferences. As Dr. Olson pointed out in a forum post, validity “involves an argument and the weight of the evidence in supporting the inferences drawn from assessment scores.” A teacher cannot draw accurate inferences about a student’s level of performance weighted heavily on homework. This teacher needs additional evidence to make accurate inferences.

I agree with McMillan’s views that “assessment needs to be conceptualized as an ongoing activity that involves gathering, interpreting, and evaluating information, and action based on results, rather than mere documentation of student performance.” It is important for a school community to establish a framework for evaluating its multiple assessment measures. This can be accomplished by thought-provoking conversations among teachers, informative workshops, and common planning time, all of which focus on gathering, interpreting and evaluating information from assessments. I also agree with a comment made by a teacher that said, “Students learn more when students are actively engaged.” Effective teachers incorporate the three basic learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) into daily lessons. I feel that it is important for students to understand these learning styles and gain a clear understanding of their own learning style.

Over the past several weeks, I have gained a wealth of information regarding classroom assessment, which will certainly help me as an administrator or classroom teacher. Reading McMillan’s article s gave me valuable information about the need for teachers in understanding and improving classroom assessment. The most important lesson that I learned from reading this article is that many times, unreasonable decisions can be made and administrators need to take an active role in educating all teachers in effective assessment strategies.

Initial Reply by Jessica Gilway on February 26, 2012 at 11:44am

As a teacher, I assumed that everyone had the same assessment practices I did. I had been trained in formative assessment and used it voraciously. I believed strongly in student self-assessment and gave it a place of priority in my instructional day. I saw the power of the importance of the link between assessment and instruction because in my post-bac teaching program someone had explicitly shown me the research and then guided me in how to put that link into practice. I moved schools after my first job assuming that everyone had training in formative assessment (and had taken a course), espoused backward planning starting with the end in mind, and worked heavily with student self-assessment as a key component of their assessment framework in the classroom. I was mistaken and I was surprised. There were incredible inconsistencies in the way assessment was used in the classroom in all three of the schools were I had worked.

When I became a principal/school director, it was even more evident how much disparity there was in assessment from classroom to classroom. I was relieved that I did not see students doing mostly worksheets and sitting and getting. For the most part, they were actively engaged; however, I did not observe a clear link between instruction and assessment. As McMillian (2003) states, “What is needed is an understanding of how assessment and instruction are interwoven, with new conceptions about what assessment is and how it affects learning” (p. 39). This was a conversation I knew we needed to have at the school level, but I was unsure how to do it without making teachers suspicious of my intentions or defensive about their actions. Teacher’s energies are pulled in so many different directions. They, like their students, need to recognize quality assessment practices and need to be motivated and have the time structured into their day to make the changes.

This being my first year, I asked the teachers which of Marzano’s highly effective instructional strategies they needed support on. Almost unanimously, they identified formative assessment and said they knew this type of “ongoing activity that involves gathering, interpreting and evaluating information, and action based on results” (McMillan, 2003, p. 39) was research-based and best practice, but they struggled to make it happen. This gave me a starting point to begin thinking about in-service professional development on formative assessment and what it needs to look like to be effective and truly impact/influence practice.

I knew we would be doing a lot of work this spring to transition to the Common Core and Essential Standards and I decided that it would be important in transitioning the way assessment looks in the classroom and re-emphasizing the need to link/interweave it to/with instruction, that I would do it in the context of the Common Core. The teachers are overwhelmed by the idea of a new assessment at the end of next year and concerned about how a new high-stakes test will impact their classroom instruction and learning. According to McMillan (2003) this new assessment will affect teacher decision making about classroom assessments, “teacher classroom assessment decision making has been affected by these high-stakes tests, notably in ways that are contrary to what teachers would like to do based on their beliefs and values” (p.37). I plan to affect it as well in a different way, one with positive consequences, not negative. My plan is to start the conversation about the need for formative assessment in tandem with the transition to the Common Core. This will hopefully allow space to embed formative assessment into classroom assessment practices as the new standards are implemented and assessed. Another piece from the McMillan article that spoke to me was the need for a revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. I find it interesting that the state of NC has actually based their Common Core and Essential Standards on Anderson, Lorin & Krathwohl’s (2001) “A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing”. (http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/acre/standards/).

Another ongoing conversation we have been having as a faculty that McMillan addresses is the answer to the question, “How do you encourage effort and intrinsic motivation that leads to high quality work?” We have talked about learning targets, scaffolding, and modeling, but I would also like to share an excerpt from McMillan (2001)’s article with the staff members at my school. McMillan argues that student effort and motivation are primary influences in teachers’ assessment decision making. He also argues that teachers need to be able to identify behaviors that indicate effort and motivation (McMillan, 2003, p. 39). This is part of the discussion question I mentioned. How do we motivate students to do work that meets the learning targets? How do we measure student effort on an individual basis? What role does self-reflection have to play in this meta-cognitive shift? Our staff keeps circling these questions with frustration. Here is some of the research from the article that I will be sharing with the staff to evaluate current practice and discuss shifts or changes that need to happen in order to increase motivation and effort and affect the quality of work. Once again, I think the staff knows these things, but they struggle to implement them. Bringing them to the table for conversation means gives an opportunity for sharing and problem solving. Then we will need to identify ways to address or change what is not working in an intentional way.

This is the research I will share for discussion:

1) Feedback specific to effort is needed to encourage internal attributions that will enhance self-efficacy. As self-efficacy and self-confidence are improved, so is learning (p. 39).

2) Appropriate formative assessment can increase student persistence (Black & Williams, 1998)

3) Use assessment to keep students engaged in order to emphasize intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning. Intrinsic motivation occurs when students in activity for its own sake. It is enhanced when activities are viewed as important, with utility and value, when learning and assessment are interesting and challenging, and when feedback to students leads to feelings of self-efficacy and self-determination (Black & Williams, 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

4) Self-efficacy refers to students’ beliefs or convictions that they can master the material they are studying. Self-efficacy is enhanced when students are able to monitor toward meeting challenging but possible learning objectives (learning targets) and by receiving informative feedback as they learn. Brookhart, 1997, 2001b)

5) Successful students engaged in self-assessment regularly and actively interpreted feedback about the performance as related to possible careers (Brookhart, 2001b). (My thought – this research needs to be shared with students and teachers alike).

6) Students should be actively involved in assessment through self-evaluation. Students need to monitor their progress by being able to apply ongoing, meaningful feedback that is helpful in showing them how to meet final learning objectives (Brookhart, 2001b; Shepard, 2000b; Stiggin, 1999, 2001b).

7) Stiggins recommends student-involved self-assessment, involving students in the design of assessments, in self-assessment over time, in student record-keeping of progress, and in student self-reflections (2001b). (This is an example of the student working as hard as their teacher does).

8) I will also use the questions on pg. 40 of the McMillan article to guide the teachers through a self-assessment and institutional assessment that focuses on student engagement (especially since this is an important part of Expeditionary Learning).

 Reply by Katherine Jones on February 26, 2012 at 1:14pm

I have seen the inconsistencies in the way assessment was used in the classrooms in the several schools that I have worked as well. I like the way you gave your teachers a choice about which of Marazon's instructional strategies they wished to learn more about. Many times, I have felt that I do not have a voice in professional development. I agree that topic #5 needs to be shared with students and teachers alike. Students have to learn how to self-assess regularly and teachers should include time in their lesson to teach students strategies for self-assessment. The topic of effective self-assessment strategies as well as the other seven topics should be very interesting for the teachers. I hope you will share how teachers incorporate teaching self-assessment strategies in their lessons with our class.

Reply by Amy C. Bland on February 26, 2012 at 4:35pm

Did you notice the comment in the article about Bloom's? I found that interesting as well.

I have witnessed classrooms not even doing a summative assessment following instruction of a new concept. It made me reflect on my past teaching experiences as well. Many times, I knew what I observed the child doing in class and on assignments. But, was I really assessing or observing?

Jessica, I always enjoy reading your responses.

Reply by Jessica Gilway on February 26, 2012 at 7:35pm

Amy,

I thought it was interesting that they quoted Anderson about Bloom's in the article and then if you go to the DPI/ACRE website for the new standards, there is Anderson again. The title of that page is the Revised Bloom's. After reading McMillan's article, I know want to go do more research on the Revised Bloom's and the significant differences it espouses.

Great question about assessing or observing? I actually made a note that I want to do phased professional development for staff on assessment. I also think it needs to be one of our school improvement goals. I just had a meeting with DPI and our performance composite is great and so is our growth level, but it is harder to make growth each year unless you really know where kids are and where they need to be.

Here are my proposed phases:

1) Examples of student self-assessment - discuss it, read about it, implement it, bring it back to a meeting to share your example, revise and try again

2) A rubric and the work you grade with it - create a rubric together for a specific purpose (we have been talking about writing), introduce it to the kids, have them use it to guide and assignment, have them grade the assignment, we grade the assignment, then bring it back to the group to share and for critique, suggestions, improvements, try again

3) Informal anecdotal records - this a tough one and there are many different options. They are great if they work for you and give you information, but how often are they overlooked. Share with staff different methods, have them select one, try it, then bring their product back to share for discussion, ideas and critique.

4) A final product with learning targets that you feel exemplifies "high quality work" - discuss it with other staff members and have them give constructive feedback, take their feedback and yours back to the students

5) What does summative assessment have to do with the classroom? Have teachers talk about how they use summative assessment and what they do to prepare students for "the test". Then share the research about best practices for test prep and set a school-wide protocol for test prep.

Amy, the feeling is mutual. I enjoy your posts as well! Glad we got to have another class together.

Initial Reply by Nikki Patrick on February 26, 2012 at 9:42pm

My philosophy has changed more in the last year regarding assessment than any of the previous eight years in the classroom. Much of the shift has been due to a more focused effort at our school to use assessment to discuss student progress. At grade level meetings with my two other colleagues at my grade level, as well as at meetings with our curriculum specialist and administrator we have been asked to have data to support our decisions. We have graphic organizers for our data that are looked at quarterly and intervention and enrichment plans that are changed weekly must include the data that drives the creation of the plans. In the previous year’s assessment has been a part of my teaching at the end of a unit or when scheduled by the county due to my personal view of assessment being a large formal procedure. I was similar to teachers mentioned in the article in that “Teachers internal beliefs and values were cited as the most important influence on assessment decisions” (McMillian, 2003, p. 36). At the time, my personal belief was that assessment was to be at the end of a section of learning and solely for assigning a grade for what the students knew. In addition, my belief was that the assessment had no bearing on what was to take place in the classroom following the assessment.

In contrast my philosophy now is more that assessment needs to be a regular part of the classroom setting, allowing me to have a constant idea of what students understand. I hope that by doing this I am becoming what the article describe in the quote that an “Effective teachers assesses constantly and wants to maximize student achievement” (McMillian, 2003, p. 41). I agree with the statement in the article that “Students learn more when students are actively engaged” (McMillian, 2003, p. 37). If the learning is taking place then the assessment will reveal and be a part of the learning. I still feel in some ways that it is necessary to as the article states pull for students by doing “whatever would help students succeed” (McMillian, 2003, p. 36). For me “pulling for the student” means accommodations like read aloud or reduced item choices. I have one particular student this year that needs read aloud to be successful. He understands and can be successful with the science content but needs the read aloud “pulling” for him to be able to show his understanding to me and others that look at his assessment scores.

I have made a change in the way that I view and use assessment. I will strive to continue this change for the betterment of my current classroom full of students and hopeful multiple classrooms of students when I become an administrator.

Reply by Keeley Smith Ward on March 3, 2012 at 10:08am

Nikki, I agree that assessment has to become a regular part of the classroom environment. I believe we formatively assess our students more than we realize, especially informally. We just have to make that conscience effort to assess more regularly and make note of where individual students are in their learning. I don't know if any of us have truly mastered this concept 100% of the time.

**Dr. Olson’s Comments to Students’ Posts to Forum 6**

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| Forum 6: Marking & Grading and Assessment Practices.In his article, “Understanding and Improving Teachers‘ Classroom Assessment Decision Making: Implications for Theory and Practice,” McMillan describes some of his research on teachers’ grading practices. He asked teachers about the nature of their decision making in constructing classroom assessments and assigning grades. In particular, he examined the relationship between teachers’ internal belief and value systems and what assessment specialists claim are sound principals of assessment and measurement.Reflect upon your own philosophy with respect to assessment, grading, and marking. Take into account any changes in your thinking that may have occurred, so far, during this course, as well as the Cross, et al. article. To what extent does your thinking agree or disagree with the McMillan’s findings? Try to be specific in your response. Show where you agree or disagree with the teachers in McMillan’s study. |

As I am sure you all realize, I cannot comment, fully, on every post and reply. What I’ve done, here, is to pick out some snippets that particularly piqued my interest, or that I thought had general applicability, and comment on those. If you believe I’ve misinterpreted you, or that I’ve not commented on something you think I should have commented upon, then reply to **Forum for Questions, Dialog, etc. Concerning Classroom Assessment**.

Keely, You started off the response to this forum with a bang! I particularly liked your comment, that, “when grades, zeros, and personality conflicts are set aside and the focus is placed on the criteria being taught, the process for motivating students to get them engaged, and understanding how each student learns, the students’ desire to grow and master the material will soar.” Just remember this when you are a principal.

Pam, thanks for sharing the quote from Davis’ (2002) article. It sums up, nicely, a lot of what we have been reading about and discussing. Also, Kendra, in her reply to your post, quoted a teacher as saying, “That the reason the fourth grade did so well on the EOG was because they are good test takers. They know nothing.” She wondered whether the statement has any validity. The EOG are NOT easy tests. A lot of careful thinking, by skilled measurement and curriculum experts, has gone into their construction. Unless a student has a fairly good grasp and understanding of the SCOS, he or she is unlikely to perform well. As Regina states in her reply to your post, “if students are truly taught the content then test scores will come.” I, of course, do not know how much time the students spent practicing, but some practice, especially on test-taking skills is helpful. Spending an inordinate time on practice is a waste of time.

Also, Pam, In response to your comment, that “Most teachers were unable to see that a test grade, which counts 65% of a child’s average, does not have to be in the form of a standardized test,” I wonder how they would feel about a suggestion (that I endorse) that they do not need to record the results of every assessment they give in a grade book. Also, thanks for sharing your comments about the Barbara Davis article. I think I will include it the next time I teach this course.

Elizabeth, thanks for your post to this forum, and for sharing how your philosophy with respect assessment has matured over the last six weeks or so. Your post generated a good deal of response, especially with respect to the use of feedback. It does take a lot of work, but it is worth it to the kids. As was pointed out in the readings, simply placing a letter grade (or a number) on a test or paper handed back to students is not particularly motivating or useful.

Olivia, you appear to have bought into the spirit of classroom assessment. With respect to grading motivation and effort, I can understand why you agree with some of the teacher beliefs described by McMillan, such as, “Teachers at my school seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable with how to assess and incorporate grades for student motivation and participation;” and your statement, that “Students should be given credit for trying,” as in “Pulling” for students to help them succeed. However, when these factors are included as components of summative assessments (i.e., the assessments that lead to report card grades) than CIV is introduced. In this case, how does the grade retain its meaning? How, will another teacher, a parent, or even the kid himself know how to interpret the grade? Most classroom assessment specialists (myself include) are OK with including these factors as a small part of a grade, not more than 10%, however. The best place to grade motivation and effort is during formative assessment. This issue will be addressed in future readings in the course, but for now, give it some thought. For a somewhat different perspective, see Regina’s post. While I could argue with some of what she says (and will wait until later in the course to do so), I think that most of what she states there is pretty sound.

Misti, it will be a while before most teachers understand why zeros should never be used as a an achievement “score.” Ask them to think about what a zero implies with respect to a student’s level of achievement. It implies the sheer absence of achievement—nada, zilch, nothing! But kids are always learning something, even if it is not much. I submit that the only time a kid learns absolutely nothing is when he or she is brain dead. So, a zero is not really an achievement score. More often than not, it is used as punishment. In regard to your comments about personal or professional choices, it is good to keep in mind Popham’s contention that all assessment practices should be aimed at improving students’ level of competency. This can occur only when assessments are, as you point out, reliable, valid, and free of bias. Teachers need to give a good deal of thought about what to include in their tests to make sure the tests articulate well with their instructional intentions (i.e., learning targets). It is not all that important whether or not you allow students to re-take a test, as long as you have some procedure in place to assess whether or not students have “mastered” the learning targets. It is good to remember that not all students learn important concepts at the same rate. It takes some longer than others. So, here is a question to ponder: If a student can show that he or she knows and is able to do whatever you have laid-out in your learning targets by report card time, is there any defensible reason why that student should not get maxim credit?

Olivia, with respect to your reply to Misti, and Misti, in your reply to Olivia’s reply, you address the matter of students re-taking tests. Actually, this is a recommended practice, especially when done the way Olivia describes doing it (re-write the question and then answer it.) An even better approach is to have students write an explanation of how they arrived at the incorrect answer the first time. GREAT back and forth, guys!

Regina, If your goal is for students to obtain the learning targets you have laid out, then why does it matter how they get there? Use the majority of your assessments formatively and come up with valid ways of determining whether they have achieved what you set out for them to achieve. Let me add, also, that there is no rule that says that all students have to be assessed the same way, using the same instruments. As for your concern with the use of zeros, see my comments in my previous reply to Misti. Furthermore, Regina, while you don’t believe that, “grades are extremely secondary to the whole process of what we do,” my position is that summative grades, for assessment over critical learning targets are very important, grades for formative assessments are primarily for your (the teacher’s) benefit and, as such, are not very important. In fact, I advocate NOT recording them in your grade book, at least not in your official grade book. On the other hand, I do firmly agree with you, “that school leaders and the assessment community will have to work in tandem to ensure that grades at every level “communicate as objectively as possible the (student’s) levels of educational attainment.”

Brian, I can sort of see the point of your disagreement with McMillan over teacher’s grading practices. If you read my previous remarks in my reply to Regina you will see that I believe in the value of different assessments for different folks—so long as the assessments are focused on the learning targets. As you imply, we need to get teachers out of their assessment “rut.” Also, I agree whole heartedly with Olivia, in her reply to your post, that it was, “great that you took the time to ask teachers at your school about their assessment practices.” As she pointed out, that is a good way for administrators to keep in touch with their teacher’s practices.

Tracee, your questions, “Teachers … take little time to reflect on why they are doing what they are doing. Why are certain grades given? How much of a grade is determined by effort? How do I determine if a child is giving effort?” are great. As an administrator, these would provide good prompts for starting off group meeting with your teachers.

Great insight, Kevin. I can see how being a parent while taken this course can be instructive. Perhaps your participation in this class while parenting a young student will help you form internal perceptions that are more in accordance with accepted external factors. With respect to your comments about effort, I take the position that if effort is an important component of learning, it should show up in performance, which, in turn, can be graded. Hence, there is little reason to capture a separate “effort” grade.

I understand, Kendra, why you might have some concerns about grading students in special education classes. The key, in my opinion, is clearly articulate learning targets and performance standards. For special education students these can be differentiated and included in IEPs.

Regina and Amy, I imagine you would agree with Jessica’s reply that administrators have to fight to preserve time for teachers to engage in meaningful reflection. And, Amy, in some of my earlier replies, I pointed out that not all students need to be assessed in the same way. As an assessment specialist in the classroom, teachers need to employ whatever means they have, or are able to obtain, to assess each student’s competence as accurately as they can. Also, with respect to assessing effort, see my reply to Kevin, earlier.

Thank you, Stephanie, for your introspective reply. McMillan would be proud. It was nice to see how your, and Amy’s, Brian’s, and Elizabeth’s philosophies have matured.

I agree with you, Katherine, that several of the teachers in McMillan’s article espoused questionably beliefs and philosophies about assessment, but that was McMillan’s point. As you point out in your post, “There needs to be a balance between learning targets and the wide array of assessment opportunities available for teachers.” But, I disagree with your statement that, “the idea of ‘pulling’ for students as a way to bring up their grades is not being fair to some students.” Are you sure you read that part of the article correctly. Later in your post you imply that that teachers should do whatever they can to facilitate the successful performance of all students, even if it means helping some students more that others. Isn’t this exactly what McMillan was advocating?

Jessica, yours was long, but very informative post, describing your efforts to put effective classroom assessment principles to work. Everyone should read it. Apparently, Katherine and Amy enjoyed reading your post as much as I did. I found your summary of research findings informative and, with your permission I will use it the next time I teach this course.

Nikki, I am glad to see that you, like most of your fellow students in the class, have modified your philosophy with respect to assessment. I think you, and the others in the class, will find, eventually, that “continuous” asses

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