

Chapter 1

Making the Leap: Rethinking Assessment Practices in Schools

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ABSTRACT

The concept of assessments has become conflated with standardized summative exams such as state benchmarks. Schools are under significant pressure to exhibit proficiency on said exams. The inability to do so results in dire consequences (e.g., state receivership, school closures, etc.). As a result, school leaders might make the conscious decision to modify curricula and assessment to best reflect the upcoming exam. This practice shifts and dilutes the thinking around effective assessment practices. Teachers come to view assessments as opportunities more so for information recall rather than instances to promote greater metacognition. This document offers insight into how schools can begin to shift their thinking around assessment practices and create a culture that supports assessment as learning.

INTRODUCTION

Have summative and formative assessment lost their meaning? Have educators lost sight of the purpose of assessments? Dylan Wiliam, the premier scholar in assessment research seems to think so. At the LSI Dylan Wiliam Center Formative Assessment Conference in 2018, Wiliam argued this sentiment. He expressed that we have come to see formative and summative assessments as an evaluatory product rather than the processes they encompass. In many ways, he posited, some formative assessments have existed as summative assessments and vice versa. Assessments are intended to inform the learning experience. In his most recent text, Wiliam (2018) also argues that in order for assessment practices (e.g., formative or summative) to be effective in improving student learning, the following criteria should be considered. They:

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-0323-2.ch001

- Provide effective feedback to students
- Actively involve students in their own learning
- Generate assessment results that teachers can use to adjust their teaching Recognize the profound influence assessment has on students' motivation and self-esteem, both of which are crucial influences on learning
- Enable students to assess themselves and understand how to improve (Wiliam, 2018, p. 41)

Many practitioners are not mindful of the above ideas when constructing their assessment practices thus resulting in the administration of useless exams. Futile exams yield useless data, reduce instructional time and induce stress in both students and adults. Overloaded with data, teachers become accountable to numbers rather than the experiences and needs of students. Teachers inevitably suffer from testing fatigue thereby reducing their comprehension of effective assessment practices. Summative and formative assessments are ultimately viewed as being one and the same, especially as the assessment format might not vary much (e.g., multiple choice). With this said, one has to wonder - what becomes of the needs of students? How might formative educational assessment practices be restructured to engage students in the learning process rather than promoting a production-oriented philosophy? Keeping these questions in mind, practitioners should note that to engage in formative assessment practices, it is important for schools to reflect on current practice in order to make appropriate, responsive and realistic decisions.

This chapter offers insight into how administrators and teachers can develop formative assessment practices that help to individualize instruction and respond to the needs of all students, particularly those in urban contexts. In addition, this document offers suggestions for examining the role of school structures and practices in supporting formative assessment practice and how a school community might engage in shifting their thinking around formative assessment. The ideas and tools proposed in this document are derived from the findings of two case studies enacted within a New York City elementary and middle school. Both schools served populations of color with 100% free and reduced lunch.

DEFINING FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Defining Assessment

Black and Wiliam (1998) referred to the idea of assessment as “all these activities undertaken by teachers and students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (pg. 63). Black and Wiliam also state “classroom assessment may provide a sound basis for summative assessments and those conducted outside the classroom may provide valuable insights into how to move learning forward” (2005, p. 183). Assessment is a classroom practice conducted by teachers with the intention of addressing students' needs in an informed manner. While some mandated summative tasks, designed by external entities, might support larger instructional shifts, the true functionality of assessments is to improve learning in the classroom context (Black & Wiliam, 2005). The consequence of external assessments is a shift in the value placed on the work completed within the classroom. Teachers internal assessment practices are minimized if they do not align to the external exam. Yet, as Black and Wiliam indicate, this should not be the case. Consequently, confusion ensues as the implicit messaging indicates that the state exam should take precedence over teacher-created tasks.

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