

Assessment Literacy

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As both a parent and an educator, I know that "assessment literacy" - understanding assessment - is critical to instruction and to meeting the needs of all students. To provide a high quality education, several key components are absolutes: (1) *standards* reflective of what students must know and be able to do, (2) a sound, standards-aligned *curriculum*, (3) excellent *instruction*, and (4) an *assessment* system to measure the effectiveness of both curriculum and instruction.

In an analogy presented by Dr. Marie Alcock, an internationally recognized expert on curriculum design, she compares standards, curriculum and instruction to architecture and building. In this analogy, Alcock compares the standards to Building Codes. They are the minimum regulations that everyone is accountable to, like a safety code. The *curriculum* is the building. The building meets the building code; however, it is much more than that. The curriculum goes beyond the minimum requirements of the "code" and is designed using a specific blueprint created to the needs of the "client" and the "context" (for whom, where, and why the building is being built). *Instruction* is the actual building activity that goes on daily. The construction work meets the minimum code/standards, follows the blueprint/curriculum, but is timely, responsive, and flexible. If a builder had plans to pour a foundation and it had rained heavily the previous night the blueprint would still be followed; however, the daily plan would have to be altered in response to the weather - similar to how educators make adjustments in daily instruction, differentiating based upon a variety of variables.

In education, assessment is both important and complex.

Assessment of the Standards is assessment that is directly aligned with the standards. It is nothing more than that – it is the minimum.

Assessment of the curriculum is different. There's a lot more going on in the actual curriculum than the "minimum" standards. This assessment involves major projects, events, and performances. It would be very challenging and time consuming to distill out the "building codes" from these types of assessments. The standards "happened in there" but this is not where we are assessing the standards.

Assessment evidence of instruction is not looking at a daily lesson plan. Assessment of instruction is assessing whether the student is actually engaged. This is assessment evidence collected via ongoing formative assessment, or assessment for instruction. We could design the best curriculum and teachers could deliver/facilitate amazing lessons, but if the individual student isn't engaged, we don't accomplish our goal. Assessment evidence of instruction is evidence that the student engaged. This is evidence of where the student is performing relative to the learning targets in the curriculum. It is feedback that is given to the student. The student is supported to analyze, sort, and reflect upon personal feedback data. In this way, it is the student who is the primary user of formative data.

As feedback given to the student is formative, not evaluative, its purpose is to support student self-reflection and to individualized goal-setting for improvement. Rubrics, student checklists, progress monitoring, etc. are used in assessment of instruction and is intended to support development of self navigating, self-regulating, self-assessing students. The feedback/data needs to be in the hands of the person who can actually change performance, the student. To get a performance bump or an achievement bump, the feedback, the formative data needs to get into the hands of the person who can make the change - the student. Teachers also use this data to inform how they teach; however, if the student is not a primary user of the instructional data, goals are not accomplished in the most robust manner.

Given Dr. Alcock's analogy and framework, it is also important for all stakeholders to understand that in education, we have four essential types of assessments and all four have a different purpose. Used together, the data from the various assessments inform curriculum development and revision and the provision of instruction - at the student, classroom, school, and district levels. To positively impact all those levels, we need different forms of assessment.

The four types of assessment are (1) universal screening/benchmark assessments, (2) progress monitoring probes, (3) diagnostic assessments, and (4) outcome assessments. These four types of assessment can be categorized as formative or summative assessments, or assessments "for" learning (formative) and assessments "of" learning (summative). The "high stakes" assessments (whoever came up with that label, should change it!!), like SBAC, are summative assessments of learning and the purpose is different from the purpose of "progress monitoring" assessments or other formative assessments that are assessments "for" learning.

Tests like CMT, CAPT, and SBAC are designed and intended to provide data to assess a district's curriculum and teacher instruction. If students perform well on these types of assessments, the indication is that (1) the district's *curricula are standards* aligned and (2) the *instruction being provided* to students is appropriate to the needs of the students - using the district's curriculum and *student engagement with the instruction* is appropriate. If students do not perform well on "high stakes" assessments like SBAC, a district must take a close look at both curriculum and instruction. **SBAC is not used to evaluate students or teachers.**

For example, if fifth grade students in a district perform poorly on SBAC Math, we don't look at the students with the stance that we need to see "what's wrong" with them. That makes no sense and is not the intent or purpose of this type of assessment! The district examines the data and must look at the scores across all classes and ask, "Are all students, equally distributed across classes, having the same (poor) results on the assessment? If the answer is yes, we need to look carefully at the curriculum. If we have pockets of students who perform poorly, we must analyze the instruction that they have been provided and how the students are engaging. The information we glean from these analyses impact professional learning decisions for our faculty, as well as instructional decisions. The analyses of data sets the district receives from summative assessments are critically valuable to how curriculum and instruction are reviewed, revised, updated and supported.

Progress monitoring assessments are quick probes that provide data to inform educators and students as to how students are responding to instruction (progress monitoring does not primarily tell us about the quality of the instruction, nor is that the intent). These probes do not

give us the information about the efficacy of the curriculum like the large scale standardized assessments do, and that is not their purpose.

In Brookfield, we have been implementing universal screening/benchmark assessments, progress monitoring, and diagnostic assessments in reading and math, systematically, over the past 20 months. Many districts have had these types of assessments in place for years. These assessments are brief in nature, ranging from one minute and three minute screenings and progress monitoring probes to 20 minute computer administered formative assessments. Assessment is not used in place of instruction. **Assessment does not "take away" from instruction when used appropriately. Rather, assessment is a component of instruction.** Teachers need to know what students know and do not know in order to inform their instructional design and delivery. Students need to know how they are progressing towards meeting their learning targets. This is a different approach to teaching for instructors who have not been using assessments to inform instructional decision-making and differentiation previously. It is also a different way of engaging in instruction for students.

In the medical model, we could not imagine a physician making a recommendation for treatment (from medication, to therapy, to surgery) without engaging in assessment and analyzing the resultant data (physical exam, blood work, x-ray, MRI etc) to inform the treatment decision. We would not expect every patient who came for an office visit to get the same treatment from the provider; that would be unacceptable.

Regardless of whether Connecticut schools have SBAC or some other outcome assessment, having a standards-aligned outcome assessment that all districts within the state administer provides a critical and necessary data set to districts for the evaluation of our curriculum and instruction. Without these metrics, districts can simply produce internal data on teacher-made assessments, self-critique, and create their own narrative.

Because public schools receive federal funds, the outcome assessments (SBAC and SAT in CT) are a federal requirement for all schools that accept federal funds. ***If Connecticut districts do not have 95% participation in SBAC, there are sanctions that are imposed (including funding associated sanctions).*** Additionally, the SBAC participation rate is one of the variables that is factored into the state's district accountability and rating in the state's school/district assessment system.

In summary, the required outcome assessments (SBAC/Science CMT/Science CAPT/SAT in CT) provide data that are primarily about districts' curriculum and instruction, not primarily about individual students. However, in order to see how effective a district's curriculum and instruction are, students are assessed. Also of interest, the SBAC testing time is generally similar to the CMT (our previous state outcome assessment) testing time.

We do not view children as "test scores." It is a preposterous notion to think that informed educators, or anyone, would propose such an idea. However, we continually strive to improve our teaching and learning, and realize the importance of understanding the different purposes for different types of assessment. **We do not fear evaluation or reflection upon our practices. To get a valid and reliable assessment of ourselves and our students, we "triangulate" data.** This means that in order to make important decisions that impact our students and our curriculum and instruction, we use multiple data points that assess *standards, the curriculum, and instruction.*

Jeffrey Villar, executive director for the Connecticut Council for Education Reform, stated that "standardized tests have an important place in education." He noted that these tests provide meaningful data that is easily comparable nationwide and allows teachers to see what their students are learning. He recognized that some schools waste valuable class time by focusing heavily on test preparation, which is something we do not practice in Brookfield. Villar suggest that schools should develop a curriculum that correctly prepares students success on standardized tests.

http://www.ctnewsjunkie.com/archives/entry/teachers_union_wants_to_get_rid_of_high-stakes_tests/

In thinking about Dr. Alcock's framework/analogy, Villar's comments make sense. **In Brookfield, we are committed to designing our curriculum to not only meet the minimum of the standards; we are also committed to creating an engaging experience for students. Our goal, through curriculum, instruction, and assessment is to support students to become strong communicators and collaborators, critical thinkers and problem solvers, creators and innovators, all while building character and connections with each other, the community, and the world.**

The curriculum and instruction provided in a district are the preparation for an outcome assessment. The outcome assessment aligns with the state standards. Our focus needs to be the iterative reflection upon and the improvement of our curriculum and instruction. By doing so, we will ensure that our students are prepared, when they graduate, to pursue the future education and employment of *their choosing*. Standardized, standards-aligned outcome assessments provide us with the necessary data from an unbiased, objective source and inform our work in curriculum and assessment. Our system of standards-aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment is the foundation for positioning our students to "**Create Their Tomorrow**".