

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL
Foundation
FOR
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

Student Assessment for Teaching and Learning: Teacher Perceptions and Practices

Conducted by the Saskatchewan
Instructional Development and Research
Unit (SIDRU), Faculty of Education,
University of Regina

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Project #180
April 2009

This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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Executive Summary

THE CONTEXT OF CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

The dialogue about classroom assessment practices has dramatically improved. This is reason to celebrate. Teachers are “reading their students,” accommodating new resources and approaches to promote student achievement through meeting diverse needs. The shoreline is changing, and classroom assessment practices are being influenced by a wide number and variety of factors which is creating anxiety and tensions in teachers. But with a balanced approach relying on personal professional knowledge supplemented by formalized means of assessment, teachers are carefully and successfully navigating the reefs of change.

Key Finding #1: Classroom assessment is contextual or “localized” and is heavily influenced by the needs, issues and abilities of the students, classroom factors, school factors including school-based administration, local community and social factors, school division initiatives and policies as well as the Ministry of Education. The heart of the classroom assessment process is centered around a dynamic, interactive, reciprocal relationship among the teacher, student and curriculum.

Key Finding #2: Teachers experience assessment as a process of “balancing” what we have termed “vertical” and “horizontal” pulls. On the horizontal axis, teachers must balance the formal assessment tools at their disposal, tools such as common assessments, standardized tests, provincial assessment of learning measures and program assessment tools. On the vertical axis, teachers are continually balancing the guidelines and requirements of the provincial curriculum with student needs and diversity.

Key Finding #3: Teachers desire a model of assessment that respects the place of their tacit and informal assessment practices, and yet provides a bridge to research-based knowledge and formal structures to meet external demands. The model needs to include samples, examples and resources closely connected to curriculum written in a common language of assessment that relates the new understandings and approaches in assessment theory to the existing knowledge base that teachers possess and teach from.

Key Finding #4: Assessment is a collective, collaborative effort that needs to be communicated to all concerned.

Key Finding #5: Teachers are using a more sophisticated discourse of assessment than ever before.

THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN THE TEACHING/LEARNING CYCLE

Key Finding #1: Teachers see assessment as an integral part of the teaching/learning cycle. The primary aim of classroom assessment practices is improved student achievement with the primary mechanism the adaptation of the curriculum and the differentiation of instruction to meet a wide and diverse range of student needs. These practices rely heavily on using informal intuitive and tacit assessment knowledge that is nourished by experience and enacted within the teacher/student relationship.

Key Finding #2: Despite general agreement and affirmation from all respondents and participants of the critical role that assessment plays in the teaching/learning cycle, there exists a general feeling of uncertainty and confusion as to the specific role of assessment in their teaching practices which is serving to undermine the confidence of teachers at all grade levels.

Key Finding #3: A tension is being felt by teachers who fear losing their natural, intuitive instincts about how to promote student achievement by relying on other, more formal means of assessment.

Key Finding #4: There is a definite shift in the role that assessment plays, particularly in secondary school. This shift, according to several high school teachers, happens because of a re-definition of the role of the teacher from provision to preparation.

THE PRACTICE OF ASSESSMENT

Key Finding #1: Regardless of grade level, 97 per cent of teachers indicated that the primary purpose of collecting assessment data was to improve student learning, followed closely by improved instruction (96 per cent) and improved communication with students (95 per cent).

Key Finding #2: Teachers are using a combination of all three kinds of assessment data (assessment *as* learning, assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning) in almost equal proportions with favour being shown to assessment *of* learning.

Key Finding #3: The vast majority of teachers, at all grade levels, use assessment to provide feedback to students.

Key Finding #4: Teachers utilize the widest variety of assessment tools in English Language Arts. They employ a wide variety of formal and informal assessment tools in all content areas at all grade levels. However, the further up on the grade scale, the more prevalent is the use of assessment for generating number grades as opposed to providing feedback for learning.

Key Finding #5: Significant tensions are being felt by teachers with respect to converting assessment data to a grade or mark which is linked directly to tensions around reporting practices and assessment.

Key Finding #6: Large scale educational innovations that are adopted and promoted by school divisions have a strong influence on classroom assessment practices. Teachers live in a tension between using informal tacit knowledge of assessment, and incorporating and adapting to external initiatives of assessment and evaluation that are shaped outside the classroom by new notions about teaching and learning. The manner and speed in which these external discourses change cause a degree of teacher anxiety and confusion.

Key Finding #7: There is almost unanimous agreement from teachers across all grade levels that curriculum, student needs and diversity, time, workload as well as changes in understanding of assessment practices and uses are the primary influences on classroom assessment practices.

Key Finding #8: While report cards are the preferred means by which teachers communicate assessment data, three quarters of teachers at all grade levels indicated that personal communication with parents or guardians, talking with other teachers, talking with students and teacher/student/parent conferences are common practices.

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS RELATED TO ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Key Finding #1: Teachers are asking for supports and resources once they have aggregated both external (formal) and internal (intuitive) forms of assessment data. Such resources might be in the form of time, PLCs, templates, samples and opportunities to dialogue with peers and consultants. This will address the concern expressed by many teachers to the effect of, “Now what do I do with the assessment data in terms of the next step to facilitate student achievement?”

Key Finding #2: Teacher professional development is more meaningful the closer it occurs to the site of practice and to the teacher’s concern. Teachers require professional development on assessment that a) recognizes teachers’ informal assessment knowledge, b) is linked to curriculum (grade and subject specific), and c) is presented within a broader cohesive assessment and evaluation framework.

Key Finding #3: As with the purposes of assessment data, teachers were of one voice when identifying the primary challenges to effective classroom assessment practices: lack of time, class size and “loading,” lack of knowledge about how to integrate, lack of professional development and lack of curriculum integration methods.

Background to the Study

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The research project into teacher perceptions and practices in relation to classroom assessment was commissioned and generously funded by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching, and conducted by the Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit (SIDRU), Faculty of Education, University of Regina. The primary aim of the research project was to engage teachers in a dialogue about assessment practices to provide a current picture of the landscape of assessment in Saskatchewan. In addition to enabling school divisions and stakeholders to provide specific support to enhance assessment practices in Saskatchewan classrooms, the findings will lend teacher voices to other assessment initiatives including the Ministry of Education's Panel on Student Assessment and Continuous Improvement Framework (CIF), revision of core curriculum, increased awareness of First Nation and Métis student progress, new processes applied to assessment such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and newly formed school divisions interested in student assessment frameworks. The intended audience for this research is teachers; however, policy makers, school division administrators and educational partners will find the report informative especially in relation to beyond-the-classroom assessment policies and practices.

Five school divisions were approached to provide a representative sample of the different contexts for classroom assessment in Saskatchewan. The school divisions that agreed to participate included Northern Lights School Division #113 (northern and remote communities), Good Spirit School Division #204 (south eastern rural), Chinook School Division #211 (south western rural and urban), Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Division #20 (urban) and Living Sky School Division #202 (north western rural and urban).

This research project involved surveying teachers in these school divisions, as well as holding focus group discussions with selected teachers from these divisions, to provide a current picture of classroom student assessment practices from the perspective of teachers.

The research questions that shaped the study are:

1. What types of assessment data are collected by teachers?
2. What types of assessment are used in the various subject areas/grade levels?
3. How is assessment data used by teachers? ("of learning" vs. "for learning")
4. What factors drive assessment practices?
5. How is assessment reported and communicated?
6. What assessment practices are valued by teachers?
7. What are teachers' greatest assessment needs?
8. What are teachers' greatest assessment concerns?

The study used survey and focus group methods to produce a description of classroom assessment practices of teachers. An online survey (see Appendix) was used to gather the perceptions of teachers concerning their assessment practices. A focus group was held in each participating school division to explore the results from the survey in a deeper manner.

These school divisions invited all of their teachers to complete the online survey. The local teachers' associations from the five divisions identified teachers who expressed interest in assessment to participate in the focus groups. The survey occurred in November 2008, and the focus group meetings were held over January, February and March 2009. Ethics approval for the project was granted by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board.

A Reference Committee was struck consisting of representation from the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents (LEADS) (Michele Belisle), the Ministry of Education (Darryl Hunter), the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA) (Barry Bashutski), the Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit (SPDU) (Cheryl Erlandson) and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) (Kit Loewen).

A Teacher Advisory Committee was also created with one teacher representing each participating school division. The representatives were: Kelly Perepeluk-Nieckar, Good Spirit School Division; Andrew Sneddon, Living Sky School Division; Charlene Hayes, Chinook School Division; Lisa Larson, Northern Lights School Division; and Jenine Yuzik, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Division.

The Reference and Teacher Advisory Committees each met twice with the research team to provide direction and feedback on all aspects of the research process.

This report to the McDowell Foundation uses aggregated data from the participating school divisions to present a general picture of classroom assessment practices. The bulk of this final report provides findings from the survey and focus groups and provides discussion questions to stimulate discussion around classroom assessment issues. Specific recommendations are not provided. Reports have been developed for each school division from the data collected from that division. Comparative reports of the school divisions involved have not been produced.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Demographic variables included: sex; type of degree; recent professional development in assessment; grade level; teaching experience; teaching location. Analysis of the data determined the prevalence of various assessment practices. Analysis of demographic variables other than grade level did not yield deeper insights into the effect of these variables on assessment practices.

A total of 897 responses to the survey were received over the seven weeks the survey was open with a completion rate of 85 per cent (the average response rate to the survey's tables was 93 per cent and to open-ended questions was 38 per cent). The response rate was 71 per cent from females and 29 per cent from males. The percentage of total responses to the survey by school division was: Northern Lights 18.2 per cent, Living Sky 32 per cent, Greater Saskatoon Catholic 11.3 per cent, Chinook 26.9 per cent and Good Spirit 11.7 per cent.

An almost even response rate occurred amongst elementary (251), middle years (216) and high school teachers (236).

Most of the respondents hold a minimum of a Bachelor of Education degree while 31.4 per cent also hold an arts or science degree. Only 8.7 per cent of the respondents hold a Master of Education degree.

In terms of professional development sessions attended on assessment in the past three years, teachers reported the following:

| | |
|---|---------------|
| School division initiatives | 79.6 per cent |
| Professional learning communities | 70.9 per cent |
| Curriculum implementation inservices | 41.6 per cent |
| Conference: Finding Our Way/ Assessment for Learning Institute | 8.3 per cent |
| Accreditation Seminar | 8.2 per cent |
| SPDU Student Evaluation Project | 3.7 per cent |

As for teaching experience, 21.1 per cent had been teaching less than 5 years; 18.1 per cent 6-10 years; 16.4 per cent 11-15 years; 13.3 per cent 16-20 years; and 31.5 per cent more than 20 years.

Geographically, 48.2 per cent of respondents come from rural communities (less than 5,000 people); 23.4 per cent come from urban communities between 5,000 and 20,000 people; 1.7 per cent come from urban communities between 21,000 and 60,000 people; 9.8 per cent come from urban communities over 60,000 people; while 16.9 per cent come from northern communities.

Key Findings, Discussion and Key Questions

A NARRATIVE: NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF ASSESSMENT

This narrative was told to the teachers on the Teacher Advisory Committee at the Learning From Practice Conference in November 2008 by one of the researchers. It received such a good response in terms of representing the tension teachers feel about assessment that it is included in this report.

Recently while using a Global Positioning System (GPS) for the first time while boating on Lac La Ronge, I had an interesting and disconcerting experience. With 40 years of navigating the lake without a GPS, I had built up significant knowledge of the lake by “reading” the lake to determine the location of dangerous shoals lurking beneath the surface, not uncommon for this very large lake. This tacit knowledge of identifying these invisible reefs is gained through experience over time and involves intuitively recognizing changing light and wave patterns in varying weather conditions that signify the presence of shallow reefs.

Even with all this experience, I thought that the use of GPS technology could prove more efficient for plotting safe routes that would avoid the reefs. On one occasion, while pulling out of a familiar bay and relying on the GPS for direction to my next destination, I headed for an opening between two islands that looked like it might be a safe route that I had used some time in the past. As I approached the narrow opening, I began to experience uneasiness about not following my past practice of scanning the water for those ever elusive reefs and instead concentrated on what the GPS was showing on the screen. My uneasiness grew by the minute. I finally abandoned the GPS and scanned the route ahead, and at that very moment realized that there was, in fact, danger ahead given the familiar changing hue of the water and the action of the waves. My hunch was confirmed seconds after I had brought the boat to a stop, fortunately avoiding an almost certain collision with a rocky reef that seemed to suddenly appear out of nowhere in very deep water. I didn't throw away the GPS. I have learned how to combine plotting safe routes and following them with the GPS, and diligently looking for reefs in less familiar territory.

In the same way that this researcher has learned to “read” Lac La Ronge, teachers also learn to read their students' progress, a form of informal assessment that over time develops into their personal practical knowledge of how students are progressing in their learning. They learn to trust this intuitive knowledge that has evolved from years of watching for signs appearing in the faces and gestures of their students. And then with changing times and ideas, the language of assessment changes, and some techniques and approaches become prescribed and formalized. In short, the landscape of assessment changes and some initial confusion and tension results.

This report chronicles the lived experience of teachers in Saskatchewan classrooms as they navigate the waters of assessment. We seek to give voice to their challenges, needs, successes and hopes for improving their practice for the benefit of their students.

THE CONTEXT OF CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

Key Finding #1: Classroom assessment is contextual or “localized” and is heavily influenced by the needs, issues and abilities of the students, classroom factors, school factors including school-based administration, local community and social factors, school division initiatives and policies as well as the Ministry of Education. The heart of the classroom assessment process is centered around a dynamic, interactive, reciprocal relationship among the teacher, student and curriculum.

Key Finding #2: Teachers experience assessment as a process of “balancing” what we have termed “vertical” and “horizontal” pulls. On the horizontal axis, teachers must balance the formal assessment tools at their disposal, tools such as common assessments, standardized tests, provincial assessment of learning measures and program assessment tools. On the vertical axis, teachers are continually balancing the guidelines and requirements of the provincial curriculum with student needs and diversity.

Key Finding #3: Teachers desire a model of assessment that respects the place of their tacit and informal assessment practices, and yet provides a bridge to research-based knowledge and formal structures to meet external demands. The model needs to include samples, examples and resources closely connected to curriculum written in a common language of assessment that relates the new understandings and approaches in assessment theory to the existing knowledge base that teachers possess and teach from.

Key Finding #4: Assessment is a collective, collaborative effort that needs to be communicated to all concerned.

Key Finding #5: Teachers are using a more sophisticated discourse of assessment than ever before.

During our analysis of the online survey responses, and more particularly as we met and discussed classroom assessment practices with the focus group participants, the need for a means to represent our emerging understanding of the context of assessment became increasingly apparent. A review of the literature will reveal many frameworks or models of assessment, but none seemed to be able to describe and represent the uniqueness of the lived experience of Saskatchewan teachers. The representation needed to describe not only the various role players in the assessment process, but also the nature of their relationship to each other and their relative influence on classroom practices. This was not in any way a linear, causal, direct relationship; rather, we began to understand that this process was emergent, yet at the same time recursive. New understandings were incorporated or accommodated into prior experience and a new understanding emerged. It was certainly not linear. Many teachers described how they made connections and enhanced their understanding from a variety of different sources (workshops, research, programs, colleagues) at a variety of different times and in many different contexts. One metaphor that was shared was that “assessment was like a spider

spinning a web,” while another described it as “a conductor of an orchestra trying to combine all of the various sections into a wonderful piece of music.”

A MODEL TO REPRESENT THE CONTEXT OF ASSESSMENT

We propose the following representation of classroom assessment practices based on our analysis of the online survey responses and in discussion and dialogue with teachers from every corner of the province who represented all of the various types of school divisions including urban, rural, urban/rural and northern.

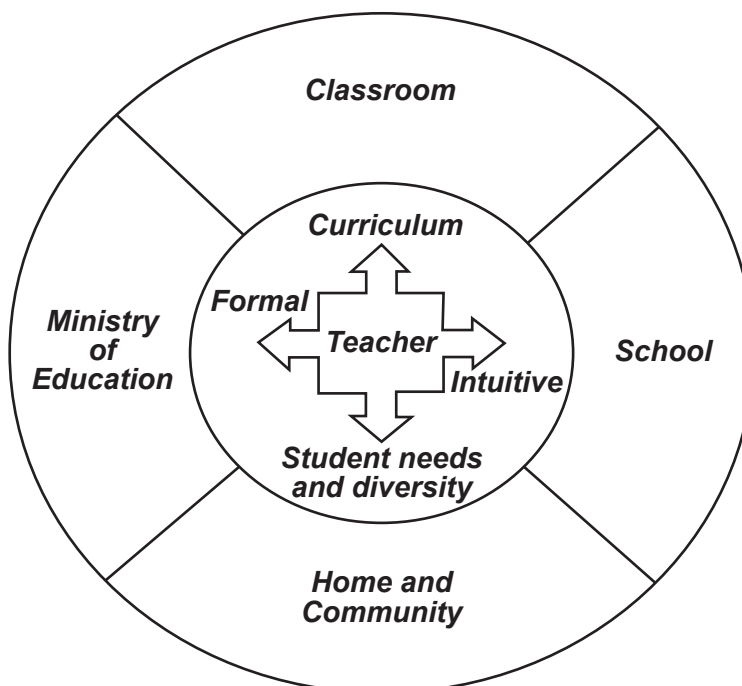


Figure 1: A representation of the context of assessment

At the heart of classroom assessment practices is a tripartite relationship between the teacher, student and curriculum. Teachers rely on their personal biographies complemented by an accumulated body of personal, practical knowledge and understanding about assessment, skills, experiences, intuition and formal assessment tools. Students engage the learning cycle with personal biographies of their own and complemented by preferred learning styles, past experiences, specific skills and needs embedded in their cultural heritage. The curriculum provides guidelines and requirements to direct the teaching/learning cycle as well as resources and supports to support teachers in their teaching of the curriculum and assessment of student achievement.

Teachers experience assessment as a process of “balancing” what we have termed “vertical” and “horizontal” pulls. On the horizontal axis, teachers must balance the formal assessment tools at their disposal, tools such as common assessments, standardized tests, provincial assessment of learning measures and program assessment tools. On the vertical axis teachers are continually balancing the guidelines and requirements of the provincial curriculum with student needs and diversity. Statistically, the results from the online survey indicated that teachers rate the influences of curriculum and student needs as being of equal

importance. The focus group meetings highlighted the other significant “pull” on the context of teacher assessment by describing the role, importance and necessity of both formal as well as intuitive practices based on teacher personal and professional knowledge. The graphical representation of this fact resonated with teachers in every focus group, who were of one accord in validating and affirming this finding.

We have to balance the exposure of new initiatives with what teachers already know and do well. Where is the common sense and common base of knowledge? (LSSD)

I think that as long as we don't forget the art of teaching then we will be fine. This is so important. We can have all the great curriculum and resources and programs, but I think it all comes down to the art of teaching; we make those small changes and know our kids so well that I think this is what really counts, really makes the difference. (GSCSD)

The most comfortable part for me is the teacher-student relationship at the model. This makes me feel good to see this because sometimes we neglect or downplay this fact. This is essential. (Chinook)

I like the shared responsibility between teacher and student. The student has a vital role. (LSSD)

It is reflective of the classroom situation, the relationship between the teacher and the student and being at the heart of the model, that definitely works for me. They are your core people when it comes to assessment. (NLSD)

The other levels of the model represent the significant forces or influences that impact classroom assessment practices. The representation allows for the influences from every aspect to impact every other aspect. Thus, in some communities, the influence is very strong, perhaps stronger than the school level, while in other situations the school division, through promotion of division-wide initiatives, might have a greater influence than any other level.

The representation of the context of classroom assessment practices did elicit many positive responses from teachers. They felt it was now crystal clear that assessment is a collaborative, collective effort. They agreed the message needs to be communicated to all concerned.

We're all in this together. That would be a great message to give on opening day; teachers need to hear this. (Chinook)

It is a unified group and we're all players in this together. (GSSD)

This model needs to get out into the community. Parents have to understand that teachers alone are not responsible for student learning. This will be a good shift, like the way attendance issues are affecting students and teachers. (LSSD)

We need to communicate this model to teachers as well. We often feel that we are carrying the burden; it makes sense for everyone to understand that this relationship in the center is communicated outward

so that we are working together. We are closeted with different agendas. We need to work together and this model describes that. (LSSD)

Whether this representation of the classroom assessment process for teachers or another is chosen after a review of the many frameworks and models that are available today, the fact still remains that teachers are asking for a vision, a clearly articulated and communicated model for the nature, role and place of assessment in effective classroom practices.

What we need is the practicality of hands-on. We need to see that this is how it works, not some models or diagrams in isolation, but I think teachers need to see how this whole thing works from beginning to end, not only within a unit, but also during the year. What do we need to do to assess at the beginning, middle and end? How is it different and why do we need to assess differently? (NLSO)

Yes, we need a model and supports, but keep it simple, just don't add more on because we have so many things to deal with right now. It won't work if it is more; it needs to be worked in with what we already have and know; don't give us more. I think it has to be do-able so that teachers can adapt. There is lots of theory but does it work in my classroom? (LSSD)

Teachers need a vision and, more importantly, a model. It would be wonderful to have a very simple chart that says that before you begin do this and this and this, do a checklist, do a survey. After you're going, create one assessment tool to propel you forward; try this, try this and try this, summative okay, are you doing this and this. So, a simple chart, lots of ideas, let teachers pick and it's all in one simple chart; that's what I think teachers need. (Chinook)

I totally agree, that's something (a chart) that I need in my classroom, just a little list, a checklist of things that I could try just to jog my memory, and most teachers would say, "Oh, I do that all the time," and that's okay too, but for others it would be a quick reminder and that's all I think teachers need. (GSCSD)

We need someplace to go, and I think it should be online, where I could go to get a model, suggestions and templates, links to curriculum, something that I can refer to if need be. If I need it, great, it's there; if I don't need it, then I can refer other teachers to it and perhaps we can start sharing ideas. (Chinook)

KEY QUESTIONS

- A. What is the vision, model and plan for classroom assessment in Saskatchewan?
- B. What are effective means of communicating the new vision, model and plan to Saskatchewan teachers?
- C. What roles should each of the four stakeholders in the model play to make assessment more of a joint responsibility?

THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN THE TEACHING/LEARNING CYCLE

Key Finding #1: Teachers see assessment as an integral part of the teaching/learning cycle. The primary aim of classroom assessment practices is improved student achievement with the primary mechanism for this being the adaptation of the curriculum and the differentiation of instruction to meet a wide and diverse range of student needs. These practices rely heavily on using informal intuitive and tacit assessment knowledge that is nourished by experience and enacted within the teacher/student relationship.

Key Finding #2: Despite general agreement and affirmation from all respondents and participants of the critical role that assessment plays in the teaching/learning cycle, there exists a general feeling of uncertainty and confusion as to the specific role of assessment in their teaching practices which is serving to undermine the confidence of teachers at all grade levels.

Key Finding #3: A tension is being felt by teachers who fear losing their natural, intuitive instincts about how to promote student achievement by relying on other, more formal means of assessment.

Key Finding #4: There is a definite shift in the role that assessment plays, particularly in secondary school. This shift, according to several high school teachers, happens because of a re-definition of the role of the teacher from provision to preparation.

Teachers at all grade levels and teaching in all subject areas including modified programs and student support services affirmed the critical role that assessment plays in effective teaching practices to improve student achievement. This point was made perfectly clear both in open-ended responses to the online survey as well as in comments made during the focus group meetings.

I'm convinced . . . I have done a lot of reading and a lot of study of assessment and I believe it is worthwhile because the research supports that the kids will do better. (GSSD)

Assessment is so critical because it tells me what the kids don't know and then I can make the changes, but often times there is that gap between, okay, now I know what the student needs, but now what, what can I do to meet those needs? How can I use assessment to change my practice? (NLSD)

I think increased attention on assessment is the only key to increased student achievement. Of all the things that I am doing, it is assessment that holds the key, the one thing that I can do to help my students out the best. (Chinook)

Assessment is critical in being able to maximize student achievement. It's crucial; otherwise, you are the talking head at the front of the room. There's no point in teaching if you're not finding out all along if they are getting it. That's the whole point of teaching. (GSCSD)

Despite general agreement and affirmation from all respondents and participants of the critical role that assessment plays in the teaching/learning cycle, there

exists a general feeling of uncertainty and confusion as to the specific role of assessment in their teaching practices which is serving to undermine the confidence of teachers at all grade levels. This lack of confidence is being felt both by experienced teachers and those new to the profession.

I am not sure that many teachers know, or can answer the questions: Who are we teaching and assessing to? And what is, or should be, our focus? (GSCSD)

The impression I'm getting as a new teacher is that there is more accountable forms of assessment than there used to be. Something has changed and I don't know if this is a good thing or bad thing. I think people are getting confused because we seem to be trying lots of new things and all of a sudden people don't seem to be sure of what they are supposed to be doing and how to do it. I even feel this and I've only been teaching for a few years, but things are changing so quickly that I don't think people know what's going on. (NLSD)

This lack of confidence is somewhat frightening, as we are starting to see the loss of high quality, highly experienced and committed teachers to other jobs because they are overwhelmed by the work needed to continue to put forth high quality learning. (LSSD)

Experienced teachers are losing the way, their way has worked for a lot of students. Our graduation rates and pass rates are excellent, they are legit, and I know that we are preparing these kids for whatever lies ahead, so it's worked, hasn't it? What we have done in the past has a lot of merit, but now it seems as if they are being questioned and there's a lot of resistance. It definitely is causing more tension and issues than what the Ministry is doing. I feel that a lot of the tension, as you call it, is coming from the bottom up and it is directed at ourselves. (GSCSD)

What is missing is, what do we do when we know that the kids are missing something? Okay, so we know through assessment that things are not right or the kids need something, so then what? What do we do, where are the things that teachers can do once we know that there is something wrong? The purpose of assessment is to guide students in their learning, but what is missing is that next step, okay so now what? (NLSD)

Confidence is not there anymore . . . and I'm a very experienced teacher . . . now this pressure is on me to use all these assessment tools and yet achieving these outcomes with kids . . . I don't have the confidence. (GSSD)

However, in partial response to this general feeling of confusion and lack of confidence, many respondents and participants reiterated the fact that assessment has been, is now and always will be a part of effective teaching. What is needed, from their perspective, is a raising of the level of awareness so that teachers can make the connection between what they have been doing and how it relates to the new language and approaches suggested by recent research and assessment initiatives.

I don't think that teachers understand how what they have already been doing is just best practices. It has always worked and always will, no matter what. If you are a friend, spouse or parent, we know how to do this, teach and assess, yet so many teachers discount this. We need to support teachers and encourage them to make sure they feel that what they already know is valuable and not something brand new. (Chinook)

We need to get rid of exclusionary jargon, we need to relate the new to what we are already doing. Assessment as/for/of are things that we teachers do every day, but now we have a new language that many teachers are already doing. Teachers need to communicate and understand that what this is saying are things that we have been doing all along. (LSSD)

I think teachers know about assessment. It's common sense, really, because we are assessing all the time, not just in the room but at every minute in every situation, but I think teachers are confused about the different types of assessment, like what is the difference between for learning and of learning. I think teachers don't get the differences and when each is the right thing to do in the situation and with different students. I think we need to help teachers get comfortable with the language and relate it to what they are doing in the class. I don't think it will mean a huge shift, but I don't think teachers know what is expected of them when it comes to assessment. (NLS D)

This happens all the time, I am assessing all the time. I don't write very much down, but I have to know where my kids are at, otherwise they are outside of the process and we are back to where we were 30 years ago, prescriptive teaching to the test, mastery learning without any consideration for the student as individual. (GSCSD)

Most teachers don't know the language, the new terms, but they do know how to teach and assess, so there is this gap; we need to fill that gap. I like the fact that this survey spells that out. Teachers are doing a variety of assessments in all content areas, so that only supports my point. Teachers know but it is being lost somehow. (Chinook)

The issue of intuition versus programs and tools emerged during discussions with the Teacher Advisory Committee after a presentation at the Learning From Practice Conference in Saskatoon in November. Several teachers of the Advisory Committee felt more confident and competent in their abilities to assess student achievement because the specific programs they were teaching (in particular Elementary Mathematics) provided them with the practical templates, samples and examples that they were able to directly incorporate into their teaching. But the point was made by others on the Committee, and affirmed by many other participants in the focus groups, that teachers are losing their natural, intuitive instincts about how to promote student achievement by relying on other, more formal means of assessment.

I think there's a danger in being too prescriptive. I mean that it's good to have programs that we can use, tools and resources are good, they have their place, but at what cost? Sometimes we rely on these programs when we should be relying on what we know about teaching and the kids that we teach. It takes away from me as a teacher if we rely on standardized assessments and other tools. They have their

place but I think they take away too much from what I can do based on what I already know. I totally agree that teachers need to have confidence in their abilities and experience. We need to be reassured that we know what we are doing. (GSCSD)

If we lose the relationship and the individuality in favour of common outcomes, then we might as well put all our money into correspondence because it is the human element that is really important. We need to promote the creative, human element in teaching. (LSSD)

On the other hand, one teacher noted that a balance was absolutely necessary because of the necessity of substantiation for referrals to specific, student support services programs.

The intuition is there, it doesn't go away, but the tools are something to complement the gut feelings. You need other forms of evidence for special services, so tools are very important. They won't give you any aid without evidence. The more you have, the more likely you are to either address your concerns or get supports. (Chinook)

Another significant trend identified through the responses and comments from teachers was a definite shift in the role that assessment plays, particularly in secondary school. This shift, according to several high school teachers, happens because of a re-definition of the role of the teacher from provision to preparation.

I am not in the business of delivering information any more, it's preparing my kids, some for next year, some for university and some for work, but it's not delivery any more, it's preparation. (GSCSD)

In elementary, teachers aren't feeling those same kinds of pressures. It's definitely different, so I think that marks are the difference in high school. Businesses want to know that the kids have skills. In fact, I have in my hand a letter stating that because of the lack of literacy, science, math and logical problem-solving skills in our Northern students, they are starting their own program to teach their workers what they need. What does that say about us? But we do need these to help us focus on what students need; perhaps this is part of the why. (NLSD)

Compounding the issue of the changing role of assessment in effective classroom practices are the pressure and demands felt by many secondary teachers to produce a mark, to translate the assessment data into a number because of the requirements from the Ministry and post-secondary institutions for transcripts. This pressure, felt more by secondary teachers, necessarily changes the role of assessment because of reporting practices, parental and societal expectations.

The struggle is to move away from pressures above and below to quantify everything, especially in high school. There is a tremendous amount of tension in schools as to what is happening and where we are going. (LSSD)

Our report cards, expected by parents, are in conflict with the way we are expected to teach and assess over the past several years. (Online Survey, OLS)

I feel like I'm doing the for in my classroom and we're plugging along, then all of a sudden it's time to do report cards . . . and all of a sudden I say, "Oh! I only have 20 marks and should really have 100 because you're so used to marking everything . . . and that's a whole big different shift. We need to look at how we are reporting to parents because we're supposed to be moving in the assessment for learning but then you have to backtrack before report cards to give parents the assessment of learning . . . we need to have a mark. (GSSD)

I always have a dilemma, because teaching at the secondary level everything seems to come down to marks. That's what everything comes down to, because it goes on the provincial transcript, for teachers, kids, institutions. Everyone wants marks, so how do you assess when all everyone wants is a mark? And so I find that in secondary our assessments go down to pen and paper, because at the end of the day everything has to come down to a number. (NLSD)

Is the tail wagging the dog? Marks are needed for post-secondary education, and this process does not necessarily follow with the new assessment practices. (LSSD)

How we have to report to parents on report cards controls our assessment. Rubrics, checklists and portfolios are difficult to translate to an A, B, C on a report card. We have recently moved away from the A, B, Cs and it is much better. (OLS)

But the report card doesn't reflect this change. I agree that the expectations have changed, but that is not reflected in the report cards where we have to convert everything to a mark or a grade. There's a huge disconnect between our assessment practices and teaching and the way that we report; one's changed for the better but when it comes to report cards, we are totally stuck in the old way of doing things. The two have become separated. (GSCSD)

I would rather not use assessment for student grades, but until school divisions, Ministry of Education and post-secondary institutions change the focus of our current grading system . . . I still have to provide a percentage grade. (OLS)

Our report cards are set up so that we have to give a grade but I am really struggling since the move is towards rubrics, anecdotal records, etc. I wish that I did not have to give a grade. Our next step will be to ensure that our report cards are consistent with the new ways that we are assessing. (OLS)

KEY QUESTIONS

- A. How do we address the confusion felt by many Saskatchewan teachers as to the role, place and practice of classroom assessment?
- B. How do we support a balanced approach to classroom assessment between formal tools and personal, practical knowledge of teachers?
- C. How do we support a balanced approach to classroom assessment between curricula and student needs and diversity?
- D. How do we address the issue of the changing role of assessment in high school?

THE PRACTICE OF ASSESSMENT

Key Finding #1: Regardless of grade level, 97 per cent of teachers indicated that the primary purpose of collecting assessment data was to improve student learning, followed closely by improved instruction (96 per cent) and improved communication with students (95 per cent).

Key Finding #2: Teachers are using a combination of all three primary forms of assessment data (assessment as learning, assessment for learning and assessment of learning) in almost equal proportions with favour being shown to assessment of learning.

Key Finding #3: The vast majority of teachers, at all grade levels, use assessment to provide feedback to students.

Key Finding #4: Teachers utilize the greatest variety of assessment tools in English Language Arts. They employ a wide variety of formal and informal assessment tools in all content areas at all grade levels. However, the further up on the grade scale, the more prevalent is the use of assessment for generating number grades as opposed to providing feedback for learning.

Key Finding #5: Significant tensions are being felt by teachers with respect to converting assessment data to a grade or mark which is linked directly to tensions around reporting practices and assessment.

Key Finding #6: Large scale educational innovations that are adopted and promoted by school divisions have a strong influence on classroom assessment practices. Teachers live in a tension between using informal tacit knowledge of assessment, and incorporating and adapting to external initiatives of assessment and evaluation that are shaped outside the classroom by new notions about teaching and learning. The manner and speed in which these external discourses change cause a degree of teacher anxiety and confusion.

Key Finding #7: There is almost unanimous agreement from teachers across all grade levels that curriculum, student needs and diversity, time, workload as well as changes in understanding of assessment practices and uses are the primary influences on classroom assessment practices.

Key Finding #8: While report cards are the preferred means by which teachers communicate assessment data, three quarters of teachers at all grade levels indicated that personal communication with parents or guardians, talking with other teachers, talking with students and teacher/student/parent conferences are common practices.

PURPOSES FOR ASSESSMENT DATA

With no other question in the online survey was there such unanimity of response as to the question of the purposes of assessment data. Regardless of grade level, 97 per cent of teachers indicated that the primary purpose of collecting assessment data was to improve student learning, followed closely by improved instruction (96 per cent) and improved communication with students (95 per cent).

Students are most important - assessment is done so enrichment, remedial, or using different strategies can be applied so students are successful in the classroom. (OLS)

TYPES OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The survey responses also revealed that almost three-quarters of teachers use the top ten assessment tools, with 89 per cent of teachers providing either “Quite a Lot” or “A Great Deal” of feedback to students and 70 per cent of teachers providing either “Quite a Lot” or “A Great Deal” of support to students to assist in reducing student anxiety.

Of the 31 assessment tools presented in the online survey, there was not one single assessment tool that was used “A Great Deal”; rather, respondents to the survey chose “Quite a Lot” for 20 out of the 31 options. By way of contrast, in only three cases (students exchanging assignments and marking in class, students mark own homework in class and the use of a word processing program to spell check written work) did the majority of teachers indicate that they do not use these tools at all.

Representative of this trend to using a variety of formal and informal assessment tools on a regular basis in all content areas are these comments from teacher participants in the focus group meetings.

The more and better assessment tools that I use in my teaching, the better teacher I am. I first think about what I want them to know, then as I am teaching it is assessment that lets me know how they are doing and what I need to do differently in case they're not. The sensitivity and the personalization of my assessment tools enhance my ability to teach and then students achieve best, absolutely. (Chinook)

I think there is also formal and informal assessment. Not everything we do ends up with a number in a book; sometimes there is assessment informally so that I am checking all the time without creating something necessarily. I think teachers are intuitive; it's part of teaching so that sometimes it's almost a case where our informal assessments are assessments for learning and our formal assessments are assessments of learning. (NLSD)

The question is, do you have an assessment tool for every step in the unit? It does not have to be a big deal, but it should be at every step because that goes back to what I was saying about how important I think assessment is to student learning. It's not a big deal; ask any parent, they assess every moment; when you are talking with anyone, what are you doing . . . assessing, so it's just something that we do all the time in every situation with everyone. (Chinook)

THE THREE PRIMARY FORMS OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS

No distinction was made in the online survey as to the three primary forms of assessment: assessment *as* learning, assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning. The responses clearly demonstrate, however, that teachers are using a combination of all three kinds of assessment data in almost equal proportions with favour being shown to assessment *of* learning.

Assessment is a high priority, but I think it depends on what kind of assessments. I think there is more summative, unit end stuff going on more than formative. I think a lot of times for a lot of teachers it's also looking at the bench marks at the end of the year because of the skills

that kids need before they move on, so I think teachers assess more as they get to the end of the year. There is always that pressure to make sure the kids can move on. (NLSD)

According to the respondents, more than three-quarters of elementary teachers utilize more than half (14 out of 19) assessment *of learning* tools and slightly more than half (seven out of 12) assessment *for learning* tools. More than three-quarters of middle years teachers utilize more than half (14 out of 19) assessment *of learning* tools and two-thirds (eight out of 12) assessment *for learning* tools. According to the respondents, more than three-quarters of secondary teachers utilize more than half (14 out of 19) assessment *of learning* tools and one-half (six out of 12) assessment *for learning* tools.

USES OF ASSESSMENT DATA

Aggregating the survey responses from the five school divisions yields the following list of the ten most common uses for classroom assessment data:

1. Feedback to students.
2. Assign grades to students.
3. Collect, mark and return assignments.
4. Reviewing work.
5. Discussing assignment criteria such as rubrics when assigning work.
6. Stating instructions in simpler terms.
7. Modifying practices for diverse needs.
8. Adapting the curriculum for diverse needs.
9. Unit planning.
10. Reducing student anxiety by test-taking strategies, familiar surroundings.

In terms of elementary teachers, the responses indicate that their primary uses for assessment data is for adaptation and modification of curriculum as well as differentiation of instruction to meet diverse student needs. No one single assessment tool was preferred by elementary teachers.

The highest ranked use of assessment data for middle years teachers was providing feedback to students. Respondents also indicated that the primary uses for assessment data focused more on assigning grades to students, reviewing work, giving class feedback as well as collecting, marking and returning assignments. As with the aggregated data for elementary teachers, there was no single primary use of assessment data for middle years teachers identified by the online survey.

More than 90 per cent of secondary teachers use assessment data to assign grades to students, collect, mark and return assignments, discuss assignment criteria when assigning work as well as provide feedback to students. In contrast to elementary and middle years teachers, however, secondary teachers indicated that they utilize three tools of assessment “A Great Deal.” These include assigning grades to students (51 per cent), collecting, marking and returning assignments (46 per cent) as well as discussing assessment criteria when assigning work (45 per cent).

The highest utilized forms of assessment, according to the online survey, were examples of student work, demonstration of skills, participation, effort and quizzes. Three-quarters of the respondents, across all grade levels, indicated that that they used these five forms of assessment either quite a lot or a great deal. The responses from elementary and middle years teachers were almost identical

in ranking examples of student work, demonstration of skills and participation as being the types of assessment most frequently used. Secondary teachers used more teacher-made short answer/essay questions and various types of tests (multiple choice, true and false or matching) in addition to examples of student work and demonstration of skills.

The least frequently used types of assessment were contracts, teacher journals, attendance, standardized tests and peer evaluation. More than half of all respondents indicated that they used these types of assessment either a little or not at all. There was very little variance across the grade levels.

In general, however, the findings from the online survey indicate that teachers are using a variety of assessment tools in both “horizontal” and “vertical” fashion; in other words, across all primary content areas (ELA, Mathematics, Natural and Social Sciences) and at all grade levels from primary to secondary. Given the list of 23 assessment tools, the lowest form of assessment (contracts) was still used by almost half of respondents.

Respondents to the survey indicated that English Language Arts is by far the content area where the greatest number and variety of assessment tools are being utilized. Elementary teachers used 17 out of the 20 assessment tools primarily in ELA, while middle years teachers used 15 out of the 20 listed primarily for ELA and secondary teachers used 19 out of the 20. Elementary teachers ranked attendance, portfolios, proofreading written work, examples of student work and informal inventories as being the most frequently used forms of assessment in ELA; however, even the lowest ranked assessment tool (teacher-made tests) was used by 47 per cent of respondents. Middle years teachers indicated that proofreading written work, portfolios, rating scales and rubrics, teacher journals and attendance were the primary types of assessment in ELA. As with elementary teachers, the lowest type of assessment used by middle years teachers in ELA (demonstration of skills or knowledge) was still used by 48 per cent of respondents. Overall, secondary teachers indicated that proofreading, teacher journals, portfolios, observations of or interviews with students and student/peer evaluation were their preferred means of assessment.

Elementary teachers who responded to the online survey indicated that they use far more assessment types in ELA with greater frequency than do either middle years or secondary teachers. For example, more than 90 per cent of elementary respondents indicated that they use attendance, portfolios, proofreading written work, examples of student work and informal inventories, while slightly less than 80 per cent of middle years and approximately two-thirds of secondary teachers used their preferred types of assessment. On average 80 per cent of elementary respondents use all 20 of the assessment tools included in the survey, while 69 per cent of middle years and 49 per cent of secondary teachers use all 20 of the assessment tools.

In terms of Mathematics, elementary teachers indicated that attendance, quizzes, demonstrating knowledge or skills, examples of student work and recording homework assignments were their preferred forms of assessment. The responses from middle years and secondary teachers were identical. The primary forms of assessment in Mathematics were standardized tests, quizzes, recording homework assignments and demonstrating skills or knowledge. As was the case with ELA, more elementary teachers used more types of assessment in Mathematics than did middle years or secondary teachers.

Respondents to the online survey indicated that in the natural and social sciences, teachers at all grade levels are utilizing the same primary types of assessment: multiple choice, matching or true and false tests, examples of student work, quizzes, attendance and presentations.

Analyzing the assessment practices of elementary teachers in all four major content areas, respondents to the online survey indicated that attendance, examples of student work, quizzes, demonstrating knowledge or skills and teacher-made multiple choice, matching or true and false tests were the primary assessment tools utilized. There was a high degree of consistency between the content areas in the sense that elementary teachers tended to use the same assessment tools in all of the four content areas with relatively little variation from subject to subject. Seventeen out of the 20 assessment tools listed were predominantly used in ELA, while two were primarily used in Mathematics (demonstrating skills or knowledge and recording homework) and one (teacher-made multiple choice, matching or true and false tests) in the Natural Sciences. Attendance was ranked as either the primary or secondary means of assessment in all content areas.

Middle years teachers appear to be more selective when it comes to using assessment practices in the content areas. For example, in ELA the preferred types included proofreading written work, portfolios and rating scales/rubrics, while in Mathematics the primary forms were standardized tests, quizzes and recording homework assignments. Similarly, assessment preferences in the Natural and Social Sciences included teacher-made multiple choice, matching or true and false tests, presentations and quizzes which did not rank as high for ELA and Mathematics. While middle years teachers used the majority of assessment tools in ELA (15/20), they also indicated that standardized tests, quizzes, recording homework assignments and demonstrating skills or knowledge were the preferred assessment tools across all four content areas. In contrast to elementary teachers, middle years teachers did not indicate a preference for one type of assessment.

Secondary teachers used 19 out of 20 assessment tools primarily in the ELA content area. However, there was no consistency to the types of assessment tools utilized across the four content areas. Each content area appears to have its own primary forms of assessment. For example, ELA teachers used portfolios, proofreading, teacher journals and observing/interviewing students as their primary means of assessment, while Mathematics teachers employed standardized tests and quizzes. Natural Science teachers used teacher-made multiple choice, matching or true and false tests and presentations, while Social Science teachers used attendance, oral assessment techniques and teacher journals.

INFLUENCES ON ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

There was almost unanimous agreement from teachers across all grade levels that curriculum, student needs and diversity, time, workload as well as changes in understanding of assessment practices and uses were the primary influences on classroom assessment practices.

I think it all goes back to the curriculum. If we are going to have time to make the interventions, then we need things in the curriculum to help us. I don't have the time to create or invent everything myself. I need some place to go, and I am thinking that the curriculum is the best place. I need some place to go where I can get the ideas and what I

need to make the changes once I know what the kids need, and that's called assessment. (NLSD)

Content enhancement and differentiated instructional practices are involved in each and every one of my lessons. This is what I am sharing with the teachers and catalysts I collaborate with . . . it's what I do 100 per cent of my time. (OLS)

As a teacher I can adapt lessons for students, but modified content is only in modified classes which in our school division is available for students who qualify according to IQ. I feel some students will benefit from modified classes because of smaller enrollments, more teacher/student time, teaching students more strategies to use for their being successful ... which doesn't always occur when class size is 30+ students. (OLS)

The lowest rated influences included community expectations, parents, school-based administration, the Ministry of Education and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The survey did not ask teachers to indicate whether these influences were positive or negative, just to identify which influences were having the most impact on their daily classroom practice. One obvious discrepancy is the contradiction between “curriculum” as being the strongest influence, yet the Ministry of Education was rated as having the least. This became a topic of discussion for the focus groups.

Right now there are mixed messages. We are getting it from the top down and also from the bottom up, because the school division has a three-year plan to improve assessment, so that's top down, but also teachers are really frustrated with the lack of templates and resources, especially with the new curriculum guides. Where are the supports? (Chinook)

REPORTING ASSESSMENT

Directly involving students and parents in the learning process by using assessment data was viewed as critical by teachers in the focus group meetings.

In today's society, we need to be able to explain how we got that mark. The mark will always be there, but now we need to do a better job of explaining why. It's part of our job now, perhaps more so than before, but I think parents and employers need to understand that it's more than just a mark. We need to explain what skills they have and we have to be able to provide that. (NLSD)

While report cards are the preferred means by which teachers communicate assessment data, three-quarters of teachers at all grade levels indicated that personal communication with parents or guardians, talking with other teachers, talking with students and teacher/student/parent conferences were common practices. Only slight variations in the rankings of personal communication practices were noted across the grade levels, with secondary teachers favouring teacher/student/parent conferences slightly more than elementary teachers.

KEY QUESTIONS

- A. How do we support a balanced approach between assessment as/for/of learning in all grade levels and in all content areas?
- B. How do we support the incorporation of assessment tools and practices used widely and often in ELA to the other content areas?
- C. How do we relate assessment practices to instructional strategies as a planned series of educational experiences based on quantitative as well as intuitive assessment data?
- D. What are examples of effective practices in classroom assessment in Saskatchewan classrooms that can be used as exemplars or models to enhance and promote the collective understanding of Saskatchewan teachers and pre-service programs?
- E. How do we establish a repository of effective practices, templates, examples and samples so that Saskatchewan teachers and pre-service programs can easily access them?
- F. How do we address the issue of pressures on classroom assessment practices and teachers from reporting practices, parental and societal expectations?
- G. How do we address the issue of consistency between reporting practices and assessment?

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS RELATED TO ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Key Finding #1: Teachers are asking for supports and resources once they have aggregated both external (formal) and internal (intuitive) forms of assessment data. Such resources might be in the form of time, PLCs, templates, samples and opportunities to dialogue with peers and consultants. This will address the concern expressed by many teachers to the effect of “Now what do I do with the assessment data; what is the next step to facilitate student achievement?”

Key Finding #2: Teacher professional development is more meaningful the closer it occurs to the site of practice and to the teacher’s concern. Teachers require professional development on assessment that a) recognizes teachers’ informal assessment knowledge, b) is linked to curriculum (grade and subject specific), and c) is presented within a broader cohesive assessment and evaluation framework.

Key Finding #3: As with the purposes of assessment data, teachers were of one voice when identifying the primary challenges to effective classroom assessment practices: lack of time, class size and “loading,” lack of knowledge about how to integrate, lack of professional development and lack of curriculum integration methods.

CHALLENGES TO ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

As with the purposes of assessment data, teachers were of one voice when identifying the primary challenges to effective classroom assessment practices:

1. Lack of time.
2. Class size, class “loading.”
3. Lack of knowledge about how to integrate.
4. Lack of professional development.
5. Lack of curriculum integration methods.

Lack of time was noted by 80 per cent of the respondents to the survey as being the primary challenge, followed by class size (50 per cent) and lack of knowledge about how to integrate (32 per cent).

I try to do the for but when you feel overwhelmed and I start feeling like I'm planning a whole way to teaching math, I feel like I fall back to the old way of assessing because I feel comfortable and have less stress and pressure . . . and the students say they like it better when we just write a test, which is kind of weird . . . the parent definitely likes it better and they want homework. (GSSD)

"Streaming" and classroom loading are two very important issues that profoundly affect the ability to teach. Outcomes are easy when we have coherent groupings, but impossible when we have such a range of student needs. (LSSD)

One interesting note from the responses to the challenges faced by teachers was that the lowest ranked item (4.5 per cent) was "Not a Personal Priority" which can be translated to mean that 95.5 per cent of respondents do consider assessment to be a personal priority.

TEACHER ASSESSMENT NEEDS

It comes as no surprise that the three greatest needs described by respondents follow on from the primary challenges; in other words, time, professional development opportunities and examples, samples and templates.

Time to evaluate students individually – time to record, interpret results of assessment (sometimes we are so busy doing other division requests, new initiatives, etc., that we may not spend as much time assessing as we used to). (OLS)

The other situation is if you are in a small school, you might be the only one teaching a grade, so what do you do then? How do you share? Many of our schools are that way so it makes communicating very important because otherwise you miss out. You need access to others so that you can grow and help your students. And that's why division-wide is so important, even province-wide, because we need to be able to get everyone on the same page no matter what we are talking about, even the subject councils, everyone needs to contribute especially in remote schools and small schools. But the role of the school division is very important, especially in the North. (NLSO)

1. More time needed to assess qualitatively and quantitatively. 2. More qualified personnel to help with assessment would be great! 3. More realistic than #2 would be "caps" on class sizes or more qualified teachers hired. Assessment leads to burn-out if one wants to accomplish it well. (OLS)

1. Hard copies of the curriculum ... some online curriculum are very difficult to adapt to school-based paper copies. 2. Teaching material that reflects curriculum (so teachers don't have to spend hours searching out appropriate content material. 3. More prep. time given to reflect the greater need for curriculum adaptation and designing evaluation methods that reflect the objectives or outcomes. (OLS)

Related to the expressed needs for more professional development and supports or resources came the request from many teachers in each of the focus groups for the Ministry to provide greater leadership, clarification and direction in the area of classroom assessment.

Grades one, four and seven Math curriculum guides do not even mention assessment; the word is not even included. No mention of assessment as/for/of in these new guides. The grades two, five and eight only include one page on assessment but at least they define as/for/of. The problem is that we have switched to outcomes based curriculum but the whole assessment piece is missing! (LSSD)

Where is the relation to new research? Our new curricula do not even mention the shining lights in assessment, people such as Stiggins or Anne Davies. I attended one of Anne Davies' workshops and it totally changed my approach. I feel so much more confident because I know what I can do, when and how to do it. (LSSD)

The latest in assessment research should be available to every teacher, why not online, and it should be incorporated into every new curriculum that is being introduced, no question. (Chinook)

The three courses I took online from Harvard through Project WIDE were outstanding and I recommend them to all divisions – check out wideworld.pz.harvard.edu/en/. The books we used were also fantastic: The Teaching for Understanding Framework by Blythe and Teaching for Understanding with New Technology by Wiske.

Teachers again responded in unison when asked to describe their preferred professional development approaches: school-based, curriculum-related, grade-alike or subject-alike, practical and applicable. Consistent with teachers wanting to develop skills and expertise in classroom assessment and feeling that one of the primary influences on their ability to respond to the wide diversity of student needs is a lack of knowledge about how to do so, teachers are asking for workshops, inservices and PLCs to enhance their understanding.

Summer short courses, meeting with other teachers teaching in my area, and follow-up/practice after professional development opportunities (an opportunity to explore the opportunity in the classroom and then discuss as a professional group the results). (OLS)

Teachers need an opportunity to completely discuss “What is assessment, and how does it differ from evaluation?” And what assessment instruments are available for practical use in the classroom that do not increase the paperwork or computer work production and accompanying new deadlines? (OLS)

Teachers need time to meet with grade-alike teachers in the division/community to discuss expectations and descriptors. For example, exactly what does “shows self-control” mean? If a student is displaying a particular behaviour, is it marked under “self-control” or “showing respect,” etc. (OLS)

However, there was a very strong undercurrent of feeling that teachers are very close to, if not already at the point, of being overwhelmed and exhausted from the

number and rapidity of changes. This was succinctly and poignantly expressed by one respondent to the online survey who wrote, “We have more than we can handle . . . really.”

This sentiment was also heard numerous times in each of the seven focus group meetings.

I remember when I entered the profession and other colleagues said, “It will get easier, you just need to get a few years under your belt and things will get easier ... you’ll have a life outside ... ” Twelve years later I feel no different than when I started ... husband asked, “Knowing what you know now, would you have gone into teaching?” I still love kids, I love working with the kids, but just with everything that is coming along with it I am beginning to feel overwhelmed and saddened because I don’t have a balance in all of it, whether it’s the teaching profession or all the things we sacrifice in our personal lives in order to achieve the levels we are hoping to and still feeling it isn’t enough. I don’t know how much more I can possibly put in and give. (LSSD)

I wonder if you start feeling more overwhelmed at this point in your career just because things are changing ... you’ve got those pressures at home ... you’re busy with kids and extra community involvements ... I think about when I first started teaching; I mean, I spent hours in that building where in my personal life I don’t have that time to put into it now ... professionally, I feel I need to put those hours in again and you just can’t. (GSSD)

Assessment for Learning is just adding to a full plate. “Enough already”; we are going really hard, it’s just one more thing. (LSSD)

I came into it [teaching] older; just did my sixth year of teaching so I had my life before teaching ... there’s a profound difference ... I think I’m 15 pounds heavier, I spend way less time with my family, friends have fallen by the wayside, I don’t have the time and energy to really invest in a really good friendship, I’ve got lots of really acquaintances but it’s really shallow. Yet on the other hand, you kind of get obsessed with teaching; it’s worth it to me right now. I really feel engaged in what I’m doing in the school. (LSSD)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- A. How do we provide teachers with the time and resources necessary to plan instruction that will maximize student achievement according to the specific and personal needs of their students, assess their learning and then modify and adapt their teaching practices based on the assessment data?
- B. How can we plan for school-based, specific and practical professional development workshops to support the understanding, role and effective practices of classroom assessment?
- C. How can we encourage the Ministry of Education to ensure that all curriculum documents include a section on classroom assessment practices related specifically to the content and design of each guide?
- D. How can we begin a province-wide dialogue on the nature of teaching in Saskatchewan schools with the aim to identify economies of time, supports, resources and finances to address the concerns of Saskatchewan teachers about classroom size, “loading” and workload?

Summary and Conclusion

This report is intended to further the dialogue amongst teachers in order to give voice to the often unseen task of assessment. The dialogue about classroom assessment practices has dramatically improved. The discourse of assessment has become more sophisticated. This is reason to celebrate. Teachers are “reading their students,, accommodating new resources and approaches to promote student achievement through meeting diverse needs. Assessment practice is less a technical application of externally developed instruments by teachers than a relationship with students characterized by intuitive insight into their learning.

The landscape is changing, and classroom assessment practices are being influenced by a wide number and variety of factors which is creating anxiety and tensions in teachers. But with a balanced approach relying on personal professional knowledge supplemented by formalized means of assessment, teachers are carefully and successfully navigating the reefs of change.

Appendix 1

ASSESSMENT SURVEY

1. Introduction and Overview

This survey is intended to find out how teachers go about and use assessment in the classroom. It has been commissioned by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching and is conducted by the Saskatchewan Instructional Development Unit (SIDRU) in the Faculty of Education, University of Regina.

All responses will be anonymous; teachers and schools will not be identified. The responses will be aggregated for school division use but will not be used for comparative purposes between participating school divisions.

The intent of the research is to engage teachers in a dialogue about assessment practices. The STF is a member of the reference committee and fully supports this research. Your local teacher association was involved in naming a teacher representative from your division to serve on the teacher advisory committee for this study.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Regina. If research subjects have questions about their rights or treatment as subjects, they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at 585-4775 or by email at research.ethics@uregina.ca. You may withdraw from this study at any time. Filling in this survey signifies consent for the research team to include your data as part of the study.

The results of the survey will be made available to you and your school division once the study is completed. We thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in this survey.

2. Biographical Information

1. What is your sex?

- Female
 Male

2. Which of the following degrees/diploma do you hold?

- B.A.
 B.Sc.
 B.Ed.
 M. Ed.
 Ph.D.

3. In the past three years indicate which of the following professional development workshops or in-services on assessment you have attended?

- Accreditation Seminar
 SPDU Student Evaluation Project
 Conference: Finding Our Way, Assessment for Learning Institute
 School Division Initiatives
 Professional Learning Communities
 Curriculum Implementation Inservices

Other (please specify)

4. What school division do you teach in?

- Northern Lights
 Living Sky
 Greater Saskatoon Catholic
 Chinook
 Good Spirit

5. What is your primary area of teaching responsibility?

- Elementary (Kindergarten to Grade 5)
 Middle Years (Grades 6 to 9)
 Secondary (Grades 10 – 12)
 Student Services (resource room, alternate programs etc)

Other (please specify)

6. How many years have you been teaching?

- Less than 5
- Six to 10
- 11 to 15
- 16 to 20
- More than 20

7. What is the size of the community that you teach in?

- Urban Community (5,000-20,000)
- Urban Community (21,000-60,000)
- Urban Community (over 60,000)
- Rural Community
- Northern Community
- Reserve Community

3. Student Assessment: Teacher Practices and Perceptions

For the purposes of this study, classroom assessment is defined as those practices teachers employ to collect information on the progress of students' learning.

1. What types of assessment data do you collect?

| | Not At All | Little | Quite A Lot | A Great Deal |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Teacher made short answer/essay | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Demonstrating skills or knowledge rather than completing a written test or report. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Recording homework assignments | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Contracts | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Presentations | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Using oral assessment techniques for students with reading or writing disabilities. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Examples of students work | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Effort | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Improvement over year or term | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Teacher made multiple-choice, true or false or matching tests | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Portfolios | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Informal inventories | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Rating scales | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Checklists | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Quizzes | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Observation or interviews with students | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Proofreading written work | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Participation of students | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Student self-assessment | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Student peer evaluation | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Standardized tests | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Attendance | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Teacher Journals | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

General Comments:

2. What types of assessment do you use in the following content areas? Please check all content areas that apply.

| | ELA | Mathematics | Natural Sciences | Social Sciences |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Teacher made short answer/essay | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Demonstrating skills or knowledge rather than completing a written test or report. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Recording homework assignments | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Contracts | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Presentations | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Using oral assessment techniques for students with reading or writing disabilities. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Examples of students work | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Teacher made multiple-choice, true or false or matching tests | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Portfolios | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Informal inventories | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Rating scales | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Checklists | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Quizzes | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Observation or interviews with students | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Proofreading written work | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Student self-assessment | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Student peer evaluation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Standardized tests | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Attendance | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Teacher journals | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

General Comments:

3. How are you using assessment data? (Group 1 of 2)

| | Not At All | A Little | Quite A Lot | A Great Deal |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Provide feedback to students | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Assign grades to students | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Reviewing work | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Grouping students for learning | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Modifying learning tasks | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Edit/proofread student work | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Student motivation and interests | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Student study habits | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Effective student learning strategies | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Discuss upcoming quizzes or tests | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Give class feedback on tests, etc. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Discuss assessment criteria when assigning work, i.e. Rubrics | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Discuss homework completion | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Collect, mark and keep assignments | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Collect, mark and return assignments | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Feedback on home work to the whole classrooms | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Students mark own homework in classrooms | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Students exchange assignments and mark in class | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Use homework towards determining a mark | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

General Comments:

4. How are you using assessment data? (Group 2 of 2)

| | Not At All | A Little | Quite A Lot | A Great Deal |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Allowing more time to complete tests and other assignments. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Stating instructions in simpler terms. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Focusing on a smaller number of assessment techniques or changing the frequency of gathering assessment information. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Adjusting the type of criteria used for expected responses and the degree of accuracy required in these responses. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Reducing expectations in the amount of work accomplished. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Requiring higher ability students to provide more than one solution to a problem. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Using a word processing program with a spell-check feature with students who have problems spelling correctly. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Modifying the presentation and answer sheets of tests and assignments to accommodate student weaknesses. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Reducing student anxiety by providing familiar surroundings and practice in test-taking strategies. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| To adapt the curriculum for diverse student needs | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| To modify instructional practices for diverse student needs | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Unit planning | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

General Comments:

5. What influences your assessment practices?

| | Not At All | A Little | Quite A Lot | A Great Deal |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Professional knowledge about principles of assessment | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Changes in your understanding of assessment practices and uses? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Time and workload | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Peers and colleagues | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| School-based goal planning | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| School-based administrators | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| School Division assessment policies | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Class size | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Student needs and diversity | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Student demands | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Benchmark samples of student work | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Parents | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Community expectations | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Curriculum | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Ministry of Education | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Involvement in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

General Comments

6. In your opinion, how highly do you rate the following purposes of the assessment data that you collect?

| | Not At All | A Little | Quite a Lot | A Great Deal |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| To improve student learning | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Better reporting to school division | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Better reporting to parents | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Improved instruction | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Improved communication with students | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Improved understanding of assessment | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| An enhanced professional self-image | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| To fulfill a professional responsibility | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

General Comments:

7. What challenges do you face to effective assessment practices in your classroom?

Check all that apply.

- Lack of curriculum integration methods.
- Lack of knowledge about how to integrate.
- Lack of professional development.
- Class size
- Not a personal priority.
- Not a school priority.
- Lack of time
- Lack of grade or subject expectations or standards.
- School division assessment initiatives
- School-based assessment initiatives
- Community expectations
- Existing school practices/initiatives
- Differing assessment beliefs in the school
- Ethics around assessment (eg. talking to others about assessment data)

Other (please specify)

8. When it comes to assessment, what are your reporting practices? Check all that apply.

- Interview with students
- Interview with parents/guardians
- Teacher conferences or collaborative planning
- Report cards
- Teacher/student/parent conferences
- Talking to other teachers
- Sharing assessment data with special services personnel (eg. consultants, coordinators)
- Sharing assessment data with in-school administration
- Sharing assessment data with school division administration

Other (please specify)

4. General Comments

1. What are your 3 greatest needs when it comes to assessment?

2. What professional development in the area of classroom assessment have you found to be most useful?

3. What professional development opportunities would you like to have offered in your school division?

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