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5. THE PITFALLS AND POTENTIALS OF CLASSROOM AND LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENTS

INTRODUCTION

My entry to the world of classroom and large-scale assessment began in the late 1980s when I completed my degree to become an educator and subsequently when I started to work as a high-school teacher in Canada. The province of British Columbia, had recently introduced high-stakes provincial examinations for Grade 12 (final year) academic courses. These examinations contributed 40% to students' grades and universities were beginning to use these course grades as determinants for university entrance. Further, schools were increasingly being evaluated and ranked based on student performance across these provincial examinations. In essence, these testing programs had grown in use to serve the purposes of "achievement, accountability, and admissions" and this trend towards expanded use has long since continued (e.g., Klinger, 2002; Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008; Nagy, 2000).

As an initial teacher, I became concerned about the impact these external examinations would have on classroom teaching and assessment, something that has long since been demonstrated (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Falk, 1994; Polesel, Rice, & Dulfer, 2013; Popham, 2002; Shepard, 1991). Nevertheless, as I began my own educational journey, I also observed the potential of these large-scale assessments to provide a reasonable external measure of students' learning, and a focus on the key concepts for my own classroom teaching. I did not want these assessments to get in the way of teaching and I did not want the provincial tests to be the focal point of my teaching. Hence I began to explore my own classroom teaching and assessment practices, with the intent of minimising the time devoted to formal assessments (e.g., tests) and grading students' work. I soon discovered a variety of instructional and assessment practices in which the students took on much of the responsibility for monitoring their own learning. It reduced my assessment workload and my students' learning seemed to also increase, and this was shown to extend to the provincial testing results for the students, as their results reached heights not attained in the school beforehand.

These initial experiences as a teacher shaped the focus of my previous and ongoing research. As a professor and researcher, I have continually explored both classroom and large-scale assessment. I have grown to deeply appreciate the role that both can play in the service of education. Concurrently, I have witnessed the misuse and misinformation about teaching, learning, and assessment. For example, there

is much promotion about learning styles, gender differences that impact learning, or the value of diagnostic testing in the classroom. Yet the vast majority of these ideas have yet to withstand the scrutiny of empirical research. Similarly, formative assessment and “Assessment for Learning” (AfL) have been lauded as panaceas for improving student achievement (e.g., Black, Harrison, & Lee, 2003; Wiliam, 2011). In contrast, external large-scale assessments have been almost universally blamed for negatively impacting both teaching and learning.

The truth is much more tempered and nuanced than what is contained in the bold claims, criticisms, rhetoric and promotion. Hence I present my current perspectives on classroom and large-scale assessment, based on my ongoing collaborative research, and the work of others who are continuing to work to support and understand teaching and learning across educational jurisdictions. I intend to highlight some of the disagreements and ongoing academic debates occurring in the field of educational measurement and assessment, while also acknowledging the opportunities both classroom and large-scale assessment provide to enhance both teaching and learning. Throughout, my intention is to demonstrate the importance of thoughtful implementation of assessment practices and the need for ongoing critical reflection of our current assessment practices and the current plans for future educational directions and policies related to assessment.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

The classroom teacher is central to shaping and directing the learning experiences of students. While the central role of instruction and directing learning is beyond debate, the teacher’s role in determining student achievement has not yet been universally accepted. There continue to be many examples in which external examinations are used as the sole determinant or a major contributor to a student’s grade, especially in the later grades in which such decisions have more important stakes for subsequent learning opportunities. Even in the earlier grades, teachers’ classroom assessment practices are often complemented with some form of external assessments, used for either diagnostic or summative purposes. Within such diversity of the role of external and large-scale assessments, it is not at all surprising that teachers’ classroom assessment practices have developed and evolved into a myriad of practices and purposes.

I argue that the classroom assessment practices of teachers have traditionally served to first to measure students’ learning, and to a lesser extent, guide instruction. These traditional purposes can be broadly categorized into three domains: (1) measure student achievement across a learning domain; (2) determine individual student competence; and (3) inform and direct teaching practice. Certainly, these purposes have been and remain appropriate, albeit with caveats. In terms of measuring student achievement across a learning domain, teachers have been shown to be able to broadly separate and sort their students in terms of overall achievement. This has and still largely occurs within a norm-referenced framework, demonstrating