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ABSTRACT

Assessment practices used in elementary school classrooms in British Columbia (Canada) were explored through a survey that also considered the perspectives of the people directly affected by assessment: students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Data were collected through focus group interviews with each of the 4 respondent groups from 10 school districts. Each group consisted of three to eight participants. The study clarifies characteristics of classroom assessment and shows that a number of issues should be addressed. Observation and the review of work samples are the main kinds of information collection procedures used in the schools studied, and narrative reports are the main form of formal communication with parents. The purpose of assessment is locating the student within the instructional program, to devise and implement appropriate learning strategies for the child, to inform the child and parents of progress, and also to fulfill the reporting requirements of the school and district. While teachers often saw shortcomings in the grading process, parents and students were more likely to see grades as more accurate than other forms of reporting. Aspects of assessment practice that could be improved include a need for more explicit description of the learning and development pathways and a more concrete explanation of the evaluation process. An appendix contains the focus group questions. (SLD)

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Assessment Practices in the Elementary Classroom:
Perspectives of Stakeholders

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Canadian education is organized on a provincial basis in that provincial ministries of education develop curricular frameworks and guidelines that are adopted by public schools throughout the province. In British Columbia there has been considerable curricular reform occurring for the past few years that will likely continue for several more years. These reforms are known as *Year 2000* initiatives (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1989a) will eventually affect the whole K to 12 system. The *Primary Program* (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1989b) which was implemented province-wide in September, 1992 has a pronounced emphasis on student-centred learning and within the realm of student assessment recommends the use of a wide array of procedures for the collection of achievement information. The study to be reported was intended to explore the assessment practices being used in elementary classrooms and the perspectives of people who are directly affected by them: students, parents, teachers and administrators.

An earlier observational study of a small sample of primary classrooms (Anderson and Bachor, 1991), it was found that the teachers who participated used assessment procedures such as observation and portfolio collections as their main assessment activities, reporting results narratively. There was a relative absence of tests and reports of grades. Further, it was found that the teachers were experiencing some difficulties in regard to developing and maintaining assessment programs that were fair, accurate, representative and feasible.

In a mailed questionnaire survey of teachers throughout B.C. (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1992) it was reported that the most frequently used assessment procedures were observation, work samples, assignments and teacher made-tests. It was noted that, "Observations and work samples are more frequently used with younger students, assignments and tests with older students." Most teachers were satisfied with the accuracy of these procedures, however fairness, consistency and the time required were viewed as issues that need to be addressed in the practice of classroom assessment. In terms of reporting, teachers most frequently reported using anecdotal comments and lettergrades, with teachers of younger children tending to use anecdotal reports and lettergrades used by teachers of older children. Teachers and principals indicated that written reports and parent/teacher conferences were commonly used reporting formats.

The Study

This study was conducted to investigate the assessment experiences and practices of a range of stakeholders of the elementary schools in a number of school districts throughout the province: teachers, students, parents and administrators. The information

targets were the practices and consequences of assessment from the perspectives of our respondents within the following broad areas: information collection; collation and storage of information; analysis and interpretation; and reporting.

The data collection strategy for this study was based upon focus group interviews with each of the four respondent groups from a volunteer sampling of 10 school districts in B.C. stratified by geographic zone. The interviews were conducted January through June, 1992. The interviews focussed upon the four assessment areas described above. The focus questions are listed in Appendix A.

In each of the participating school districts two schools were asked to participate. Within each school we worked with four classes: two classes at the grades 3/4 level (termed *Primary 4/Intermediate 1* within the *Year 2000* context) and two classes at the grades 6/7 level (*Intermediate 3/4*). This involved focus group interviews with separate groups of students, their teachers and their parents. Each focus group consisted of from 3 to 8 participants and lasted 60 to 90 minutes. In addition we also interviewed the principals of each participating school and one or two district level educators within each participating district.

All interviews were recorded and then summarized. The data were analyzed to reveal patterns consistent within respondent groups across district, and to identify patterns in common and unique across different respondent groups.

The Findings

The findings are reported in summary form in this paper for teachers, parents, students and administrators.

TEACHERS

Teachers use an array of assessment procedures with observation being the one reported as being most widely used. The other most common assessment practices include collection and review of student work samples, tests and student self-evaluation. These assessment procedures are not discrete, specific activities rather they constitute broad categorization of assessment practice and in application vary considerably one time to another, and one teacher to the next. Teachers also use assessment terms in particular ways. *Assessment* refers to the collection of information about student performance whereas *evaluation* refers the making of judgements about this information. *Anecdotal report* is a narrative report on student achievement which may include descriptions of anecdotes relevant to student achievement but can also include summary descriptions of student abilities and characteristics. In this paper the terms assessment and evaluation

will be used interchangeably to refer to the activities and procedures associated with judging student achievement, anecdotal reports will be referred to as narrative reports.

Assessment then is a mix of procedures embedded in the school day and happening more or less continuously. One teacher described assessment as a *running record* of what is going on with all the students in her class. Assessment tends to be rather intuitive with the teacher knowing tacitly what the program is about and the general developmental trends of children at this particular age, and locating the students within it. In doing so, the needs of the student in relation to the instructional program are determined and the necessary steps to correct are determined then implemented and presumably assessed in further cycles.

The teachers place a high value in *authentic* assessment. The use of authentic assessment procedures has led to the collection of different kinds of information and generally, substantially greater amounts of it than if only tests were used. This has created some problems in managing this information (particularly storage) and interpreting it for reporting purposes. In fact the emphasis on compatibility between assessment activities and instructional activities (authenticity of assessment) is a predominant focus for many teachers - to an extent with minimal consideration of how to evaluate or analyze the data generated. Teachers are also moving or want to move towards student self-assessment. Student self-evaluation is a deliberate attempt to place more responsibility on the student for evaluative decisions in order to foster greater student responsibility for their own learning. The information generated from student self-evaluation tends to be used for immediate instructional feedback for both the teacher and the student particularly in the planning of further learning activities. In some cases the completed forms used to prompt students to assess their own achievement are included in student portfolios.

Reporting has become a major task for teachers with a general rejection of lettergrades and acceptance of anecdotal or narrative reporting. This move to narrative reporting has not been well received by all parents nor all students. To an extent there appears to be a reticence by teachers to evaluate in favour of description or monitoring of student performance.

Procedures

Observation is reported as the main assessment procedure for collecting information, particularly for primary and early intermediate level (the grades 3/4 classes). This was supported by another study that was specifically directed at the use of observation as a classroom assessment practice (Nicholson and Anderson, in press).

These teachers did not generally permanently record their observations in the form of *Post-it* notes or on a computer - this was viewed as a waste of time by some teachers. If records were kept they were anecdotal or a summary of observations or recollections. Detailed or verbatim recording was viewed as infeasible and lacking much utility. However, some audio recording was used.

The observations were directed at particular students for particular purposes. If expectations were met, the conclusion was that *all is well*; if there was a discrepancy then this was noted and further action (generally instructional or perhaps further confirmatory observation) was taken. Discrepancies are based on variation of student behaviour to expectation in relation to the aforementioned developmental or learning pathways or simply to general class performance levels. The expectations were, as mentioned above, developed implicitly and the comparison of observation to expectation was relatively intuitive.

Observation was not highly structured in terms of the categories of information looked at or for, nor in terms of when it is conducted. It consisted of many activities centred on *watching kids*: watching them work in groups on projects, play with peers in the playground or work independently on math problems. The focus was on a particular student - one at a time. For some teachers, observation can also include discussing current work and activity with a student, questioning the student about difficulties they were encountering, and suggesting strategies the student could use to resolve issues or problems (other teachers term this individual conferencing). The observations were not generally recorded verbatim and in some cases not recorded at all. Most often notes were made of notable observations when time permitted, often at the end of the day or when students were all engaged with activity such as at *centre*, or when another adult was taking the class. The reason given in regard to the absence of notes is that the information is *kept in my head*. The teacher forms a mental record of where the student is in regard to the instructional programs of the classroom and the observations seem fit and modify that record. Observation is a procedure used across a broad range of educational goals and is of particular importance in regard to the goals of social and emotional development.

Collection and review of student work samples is viewed as closely allied with observation as an assessment procedure. It is embedded into the school activities but it does involve direct feedback to the student generally in the form of evaluative comments and in some cases marks (particularly at the grade 6/7 level). The work collected includes student journals, assignments and collaborative projects. It is an on-going procedure but is less continuous than observation in the sense that it is based upon

student work that is produced one piece at a time. Records are kept of the comments and the marks assigned to serve as the basis for report cards. These are maintained by the teacher.

In some cases a portfolio may be assembled to include a wide variety of student work, this will be saved for a period of time. The selection of work to go into a portfolio may be done by the student, teacher or both together.

Student self-assessment was consistently, positively regarded by teachers and students. Teachers had a number of procedures in use. They generally involved the student evaluating his/her performance in a particular classroom activity along two dimensions. The students were asked to indicate the extent to which they *enjoyed* or *were satisfied with* a particular aspect of the class. The other dimension involved students rating their performance in terms of *how well* they did in learning or completing a project or assignment in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses. A common procedure in self-assessment was the development of a sheet of specific questions the teacher prepared for the students to answer in regard to self-assessment. Self-assessment was also used in the judgement of social and emotional development by students. Self-assessments were sometimes compared to parallel teacher reports.

Tests were relatively common in most classrooms but more so in the grades 6/7 classes. They were used particularly in mathematics and also in spelling and in science. When tests were given to students they were scored either by the teacher or by students. In some cases the scores were aggregated over a time period to yield averages. However, these aggregated scores were not generally reported in the primary classes (grades 3/4). In some student led conferences, students could include test results in their portfolio - this was done at the request of the student. It was interesting to note that in schools with structured, student-led conferences most parents and students wanted the option to include test scores in the portfolios. Some teachers reported the use of standardized tests such as reading inventories to help get an overview of student ability range of the class. These were used near the start of the school year with the whole class or sometimes throughout the year with individual children as the need arose.

These different assessment procedures collected information on different aspects of student achievement. The focus of observation was on *process*: the kinds of things students were doing. Teachers were interested in the approaches taken to problem solving, the ability to cooperate rather than the level of detail associated with behavioral objectives. This level of focus was viewed as important - as one teacher said *Too much detail gets in the way*.

Individual conferences were discussions of academic activities with individual students - query of what the student is currently doing and why, where they are in the task, and a number of questions from the teacher to essentially test the student on the current work.

Student products were the other main source of assessment information. The products were generally written reports and assignments although other formats of presentations were used such as spoken presentations to the class. This was a regular format in one class in which each project was presented orally to the class and in written report form. The class also offered evaluative comments on the presentation for the student.

The storage of assessment information was idiosyncratic. The most common formats and procedures were marks books, file folders, and to a lesser extent computers.

Purpose

The main reason for doing assessment was for monitoring students in relation to curricular location. The question to be answered is essentially:- *is the student on track?* The main purposes behind assessment given were the aforementioned monitoring in order to inform instruction, the reporting to parents and the fulfillment of administrative requirements - in this case a minimum of five communications with parents per year. These communications take the form of two conferences (face-to-face meetings) and three written reports. The formats of conferences and reports varied considerably.

Another purpose that came out was that assessment was of direct use to the student - to inform the student of his/her position in relation the goals of schooling. There was a major thrust to have students consciously consider their own learning - identify and articulate goals for their own learning, devise ways of determining achievement, and the implementation of these plans. So in this way assessment has a very strong pedagogical link for the students themselves both as an academic skill and a general life skill.

Interpretation

Interpretation was based on comparison: comparison of student performance in relation to goals, in relation to past performance and to a lesser extent in relation to other students. The goals which are used as criteria have a number of levels of specificity. At the broadest level are the goals of education as described at the provincial level in the Ministry documentation on the *Year 2000* initiatives. These are categorized as academic, social/emotional, physical, and others. More specific goal description are still fairly global descriptions of the *independent learner, the problem solver, or the cooperative*

student. More specific yet are the description of skills that can be developed for specific students.

The goals are derived from various mappings of the curriculum. To an extent this map or layout is implicit - the teacher through experience knows *where* a student should be (the concept of location is recurrent in the sense of assessment locating a child - where the student *is at* in a curricular or schooling sense). This implies that there is a general overview of program pathways that the teacher holds in cognition. This is supported by descriptions of curricular goals such as those provided by the Ministry or in textbooks or programs, and by *widely held expectations* (the term the Ministry has used over the years to discuss the development of grading criteria) and by learning descriptors.

Assessment essentially locates the student in this space - is the student more or less where he/she should be. *Should be* is derived on the basis of the place in the program the class is, the abilities of the student and the effort the student is expending. To an extent if the student is appropriately located (in terms of performing adequately for that age at the time) then less assessment-type attention is required. If the student is performing below appropriate location then more attention both assessment-wise and instructionally has to be given. This may result in referral to specific test-based assessment by a school-based team or a district support person to determine if a student requires special programs of intervention. For example, students identified as having difficulty with reading will be tested and if necessary will be placed in a remedial, structured program.

A concept that seems to be operative in the practice of assessment is that the bulk of the students are basically on-track and the need to distinguish among these on-track students is not great as it serves no useful purpose. Attention is given to those who are not within the expected range of class performance.

Another key concept in assessment besides location is that of progress. The student is expected to change location in a positive direction and at an appropriate rate. The pathway and the rate are implicitly known by the teacher through experience. There is concern expressed for new teachers who are unlikely to know these developmental and learning pathways.

Goal and Strand Areas

The kind of assessment activities used in classrooms was influenced by the kind of student performance or achievement being assessed.

Social/emotional goals tended to be lumped together as a single entity that was assessed through anecdotal observation. The observation occurs in varied locations - the classroom, the gym, the playgrounds and anywhere else students mingle in groups. The

goal area was viewed as important particularly in the early years of schooling. One teacher would consider holding a student back from moving to the next year of schooling on the basis of inadequate social abilities although the school does not generally hold students back.

Academic goals involving reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies received the majority of the attention in regard to assessing student progress. And more so as you move from early Primary through Intermediate.

Other goal areas discussed were more general intellectual or academic skills such as work habits, organizational skills, learning strategies, and problem solving skills necessary for general academic success and effective functioning as an adult. These were directly assessed in some cases, particularly problem solving skills. There was a pronounced affinity for developing within students the abilities to set goals, to devise means of achieving them, to devise ways of monitoring progress, and to implement these plans. This fell under the rubric of self-evaluation. Students at all levels reported that they were required to state goals for themselves both of a short-term nature (what are going to accomplish in the next 30 minutes) to longer range plans (next term).

Reporting

The most common form of report to parents is a written, narrative report in which the student is described in terms of the goals of education: intellectual, social and emotional, physical and aesthetic. The general pattern involves comments on the student's social abilities and characteristics, status reports on reading, writing, mathematics and other school subjects, and perhaps a comment on physical activities or skills. These are referred to as *anecdotal reports*. They vary in length from one-half to two pages. Some are essentially descriptive accounts with no evaluative comment. Teachers report that each anecdotal report requires from 45 minutes to 2 hours to complete. The reports were completed three times each school year. The narrative report is sometimes supplemented by some type of grading as students progress from primary through intermediate levels.

Another reporting format is the conference in which the teacher and parent and sometimes the student meet to describe and discuss the school. Conferences were receiving increasing attention by some teachers (and on a school-wide basis in some instances) as the main vehicle for communicating with parents. This will be described in more detail in the Student and Parent sections of the paper.

Marks And Grades

In the Primary Program (grades 1 to 3) no grades are reported for students. In the Intermediate Program lettergrades are reported in some schools but the trend is definitely to reduce if not eliminate lettergrades in reports on student achievement. Within classrooms students do get marks on tests and some assignments but generally, at the primary level, no grades are reported in written reports or in conferences. This rejection of lettergrades is closely associated with the rejection of testing and comparison of students to others students, and with attempts to enhance and maintain positive student self-esteem.

STUDENTS

Students were rather vague in their initial responses to the questions on classroom assessment. They were not generally familiar with the terms *assessment* or *evaluation*. However, tests, grades and report cards were familiar and would easily elicit comment. With some probing Intermediate students could explain what is meant by the term classroom assessment and evaluation. Once talking about report cards students at all grade levels were knowledgeable about the kinds and sources of the information on which they were based. The students generally viewed assessment being centred on subjects rather than goal areas of education or broad areas such as problem solving, critical thinking and so on.

According to students the purpose of report cards was to describe *How we are doing* in subject matter areas, and to let your parents know how you are doing and the things you should work on. The report would often include input from both the teacher and student. Primary students indicated some nervousness about report cards. The report card was linked with a conference with parent and teacher (and sometimes student).

Tests were familiar to all students although older students tended to get more tests than younger students. The tests were often associated with mathematics and spelling. They were marked by the teacher in terms of correctness and often with comments. The teacher generally discussed the results with students both individually and as a class. The test scores were recorded and averaged to indicate overall performance. However, at the primary level these test results were available to the student but were not generally reported to parents. Tests were a common element of schooling and were main contributor to the report card at the intermediate level. Students were generally ambivalent about tests. They did not indicate a strong distaste for tests nor did many students say they liked them.

Assignments and projects were also common parts of classroom assessment. Some performance testing was in the form of writing and delivering a speech. The speech was evaluated by the teachers and also by each student in the class. The evaluation was based on several criteria such as eye contact, organization, etc. The students reported that they found this understandable and generally useful.

Students also indicated that they do conduct self-assessment by evaluating their own work particularly in terms of what they felt about how well they have done, the areas in need of improvement, areas of interest and perhaps the next topic for a project. This self-assessment can occur at various times in the year, and focus on specific subjects or class activities or personal characteristics. The topics to be self-assessed included school work such as reading and mathematics but could also include out-of-school activities particularly when the student was describing what he/she is *good at*. These assessments were discussed with the teacher in order to clarify what the areas were and how the student derived the assessment. The students said that self-assessment was useful to an extent for themselves but primarily to let parents know how well the student is doing. One student found self-assessment valuable in conjunction with teacher evaluation of the same work or activity.

Reporting of lettergrades was viewed by some students as more accurate reflection of achievement than narrative comment. Some students noted that accuracy is greater for lettergrades since the lettergrades can be made within a number of categories for each subject. As one Intermediate student commented:

[Lettergrades are more accurate]... 'cause you can see it instead of reading it over and over again and then you might be able to understand it. This way [lettergrades] you can see it.

Another student:

It [lettergrades] tells the different parts of each subject every little thing your doing.

Other students held the opposite view in that comments on anecdotal report were more analytic, they could show you where you are having problems:

In handwriting I can't do a D very good. If she just puts down a C (a lettergrade) then I don't know what I'm doing bad.

In one group of students interviewed, the older students tended to lean towards lettergrades whereas the younger students were positive about narrative reports. However, there was no overall consistent pattern in regard to age.

The reports were viewed as important by all students, they all read them and generally with their parent(s). Students reported that they do attend to the teacher's

comments in order to improve performance for the next assignment. Reports tell the parents how you are doing in school in relation the *subjects*. The concept of evaluation was common usage in talking about reports. Students often referred to doing well or *bad* in school in referring to the use of report cards.

Students had experience with tests and with marks. All tests were marked and often these were placed in a portfolio. Generally assignments and projects were not marked but rather comments were made by the teacher. They could discuss what tests were about and how marks (percentages) were determined and how cut scores were determined:

If you get 40 out of 42 that means you have at least 85% or around there.

It was necessary to get certain scores in order to go onto the next unit and students were well aware of what these cut-points were.

Students also report that the anecdotal report are a bit misleading in that they are always positive they don't really let the student how they are doing in a comprehensive sense.

The way they write it they write all the good things about you.

They don't tell you the bad things..

They'll tell you that you need to improve but they won't say you're doing bad.

Conferences took many forms but the parent-teacher-student conference was a novel experience for most students. An interesting school-wide initiative in one school was the 3-way student-led conference: a relatively high structured conference in which the student presented an overview of achievement based upon a portfolio for supporting evidence. The student in collaboration with the teacher selected the content of the portfolio. The student would prepare for the conference by identifying areas in which he or she is strong and those that need improvement, areas they like and those they don't. The teacher also prepared an agenda for the students conduct their presentation which kept the students on track and insured they would cover the major areas of learning. The teacher also helps the student during the presentation by prompting the student with question as necessary. The outcome of the conference was an action plan which consists of goals for the student to work on for the next term and specific activities the student will do in order to achieve the goals. Students reported that they do use these goals in school and work towards achieving them. The students also set a goal each Monday in their *Response Journal* and students, parents and teacher monitor the achievement of these weekly goals which are considered small goals whereas the goals on the action plan are large goals. The goals tend to be associated only with school-based activities or learning goals.

PARENTS

Parents viewed assessment largely from the perspective of reporting. The means of generating and collecting data was not a spontaneously adopted focus, if these areas were to be discussed they would have to be introduced by the researcher.

Many parents were very concerned about not only the assessment practices current in the school but the whole thrust of the *YEAR 2000* initiative. These parents were worried about the possibility of their children losing a year or more while the schools are *experimenting* with the *YEAR 2000*. Anecdotal reporting was viewed by a number of parents as a major problem. These reports were uninformative, vague and ambiguous. One parent said:

The "can do" statements in report cards are not valid and I don't think anyone can be held accountable for them ... the teacher writes them and interprets them one way, the principals reads them and interprets them another way, each of two parents can read them and interpret another way, a third party can read them and interpret another way.

Parents would like to see succinct evaluative reports on the achievement of their children in the academic areas of reading, writing, mathematics. Many also expressed an interest in knowing what they could do at home to work with the child on any problem areas, and would appreciate information related to this in the report. Certainly descriptive and anecdotal comments are informative but not without some judgement by the teacher on the performance of the student. One parent stated that *..there is too much "can do" and not enough honesty*. Students need to know that there are expectations for them in regard to achievement in school and parents don't think this is happening. Further, the concept of comparative interpretations is viewed as useful and informative by of most parents. To know *where the student stands* is necessary for parents. These narrative reports were found to be lacking of substance. The reports were found to be essentially non-informative. The parents wanted to know *where their child was at* and the report did not do that. Another parent's comments captures some of the major elements of parent perceptions:

I think the Primary Program is . . . wonderful. . . . I would like to know how my son and daughter are doing in comparison with other kids. Not in a big high comparative way but I want to know if there is a deficiency that I can help with and that kind of thing . . . In terms of "Is his reading okay with a range? Is the math and computation okay within range?" Or am I going to all of a sudden in grade 6 or 7 find that I am going to have to be remediating[sic] all of them? I

want to know a little ahead of time. And I think the teachers are all struggling with that. They've moved right into the Year 2000 assessments and they have been doing a great job of it but it's a little uncomfortable for all of us I think, or some of us anyway.

Sample reports were brought along to some interviews to illustrate the criticisms. Those reports that were considered fairly meaningless were essentially descriptions of some of the activities the student did in the past term with little evaluative comment. One example is a description of a student's achievement in writing:

... [she] can express her ideas in written form.

However, some narrative reports were viewed as informative for the parents. The reports considered to be meaningful not only described what the student did but added evaluative comment in regard to the level of performance:

...recorded 2128 pages this term, all but one of which were from books of over 100 pages. Such plentiful reading practice contributes to his high level of comprehension, inference and ability to predict. ...

Parents wanted focus on the specific academic achievement of the children, not to the exclusion of evaluation of social development and general academic skills.

Anecdotal reports that were viewed positively by parents were obviously directed to the individual child and did describe, at the appropriate level of specificity, the characteristics of the child that have academic relevance. In addition the report would contain description and comment on personal characteristics such as social competencies. One parent's comments illustrate the importance of relevance and specificity:

The anecdotal comment, even things that were negative, were phrased in a positive way offering ways in which things could be improved. Flaws weren't glossed over they were addressed in comment. There was a slightly different focus between the first report card and the second. The first had a lot to do about how my son was fitting in with this particular class, being new to the school, and how he was meeting assignments and getting along. Now that was really important to me, that was my major concern because I feel that if a child doesn't have good self-esteem and feel good about their place in the school then they can't do their best work. The second report focused on more actual work and how he was doing and how he had come from his first report to the second.

Positive views of narrative reporting were described by a number of parents remarking that anecdotal reports are important in that they show that the teacher *really knows* my child. This was highly valued although it should be balanced with information on the academic status of the child.

In considering the use of grades in relation to anecdotal reporting, parents generally favoured the use of lettergrades to report on student achievement, but not as an *either/or* proposition. Parents were sensitive to the fact that grades can have damaging effects on students who are constantly failing. Parents did note that certainly a consistent diet of low grades is very demoralizing for students and grades should not be used in this way. Yet for some students grades are motivational and useful particularly for teenaged children. A comment that would encapsulate the idea is:

The grades would work for the one (the child who finds them motivating) but not the other but the comments don't work either.

Parents suggested that there should be variation in the use of grades and evaluative judgement from the Primary through the Intermediate and Graduation (high school) levels. Primary students should experience school as a positive place and so grades should be relatively absent. However, as the student grows older, grades and comparative reporting should be used and would have positive effects in the long term.

In some schools, student-parent conferences were viewed as being relatively uninformative and student self-assessment of little value in terms of informing parents of student achievement. This negative view was associated with parents who were unclear about what was going on in the school with their child, unsure of the purpose and format of the conference, and perceived a lack of time given to parent/teacher interaction. On the other hand one school participating in the study had developed what interviewed parents considered to be informative reporting based on a three-way conference: student-teacher-parent. Parents were informed about the nature and format of the conference and their child's classroom activities both by the teacher and a brief written note from the student. The conference was essentially a presentation of the student portfolio of work by the student to illustrate achievement in the various subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics. The teacher supported the presentation by providing the student with an agenda to follow and prompts and comments to insure the parent was fully informed of the content and meaning of the presentation. The conference was scheduled for 30 minutes but ran from 20 to 60 minutes. Parents reported that they were informed of *where their child was at* and could discuss issues as they arose with the teacher. The conference resulted in a brief report by the teacher on the child's achievement in school (an abbreviated narrative report), one or two goals for the student to work on in the upcoming term, and a brief description of how to achieve these goals. This action plan was developed during the conference. All parents from this school participating in the focus groups found the information generated from the conference and the continuous

information generated from the follow-up on the action plan throughout the term to be on-target and meaningful.

A common theme in all parent interviews was that the quality of the assessment and other aspects of the program are very dependent on the teacher:

But I truly believe it has to do with the teacher ... one time you just get moving and you're going and feel like a part of what's going on in the classroom whether you can be there not.. and another time you feel that you're blocked off and when really do realize there's a problem. What are you going to do, what are you going to say? And the you think "Well there's only another month left", so you just let it slide..

The major purpose of assessment, particularly reporting, was information on the educational status of their child. Parents said they wanted to know what is going on in the class and where their child is. One Intermediate parent brought along copies of *Learning Descriptors* which the teacher had distributed to parents. She found these descriptors to be very useful in understanding the program and the assessment of her child. These gave the parent an idea of the range of performances that could be expected of a child of a given age.

ADMINISTRATORS

The principals and central office administrators interviewed in this study were supportive of the directions current in classroom assessment: learner focused, reliance on narrative reporting to parents, reduction in the use of standardized tests, and increased use of student self-assessment. In general the only district policy in regard to classroom assessment is administrative requirement regarding the frequency and formats of reports to parents. Teachers are required to issue written reports three times a year (Fall, Spring and June) and conduct two verbal or *informal* reports or conferences. In addition, there are formal assessment procedures in place for students identified by the teacher as having the potential requirement of special programming. Some districts had had district-wide assessment programs involving the administration of commercial standardized achievement tests to all students at selected grade levels but these programs had been discontinued. One district had a district-wide grade 10 examination program modelled on the Grade 12 Provincial Examinations but 1992 was the last year for this program. The district office can be viewed as a facilitator of the procedures developed and implemented at the school level. This facilitation may take the form of supporting district-wide in-service, providing a district facilitator to assist teachers with assessment

issues and practices, teacher travel to other schools and districts, discussion groups and assistance in the location and acquisition of funds to support the development and implementation of school and teacher-based projects. The schools are relatively independent in regard to the classroom assessment practices used by the teachers.

Most schools do not have specific policy in regard to classroom assessment practices, rather the principal provides guidelines which are often developed in collaboration with staff. The principal is responsible for reviewing all written reports that are sent home to parents and so some school-based influence is exercised on a formal basis. Principals also serve a facilitative role for teachers in terms of development and implementation of assessment initiatives. Principals also serve a district communications role in that they regularly meet with other principals in the district to discuss current issues and practice, and by reporting back to their staff keeping teachers informed of developments in the district.

In Conclusion

The study has resulted in the elucidation of a number of characteristics of classroom assessment and a number of issues that should be addressed.

Classroom assessment is an on-going teacher centred activity involving a mix of procedures with observation and the review of work samples as the main kinds of information collection procedures and narrative reports the main form of formal communication with parents. Much of the interpretation and evaluative judgement tends to be of a tacit, intuitive nature based upon knowledge the teacher has acquired through experience in the classroom. The purpose of assessment is locating the student within the pathways of development of the instructional program in order to devise and implement appropriate learning strategies for the child, to inform the child and the parents of the progress along these pathways, and to a lesser extent fulfill reporting requirement of the school and the school district.

There were mixed reactions in regard to lettergrades. Some teachers express an aversion to the comparison of students to each other in terms of achievement. They reject the use of lettergrades. Other teachers saw value in comparing or using grades as benchmark:

It gives them an idea of where they're (the student) going, where they want to go . . . when a kid comes to me with an idea that they are a C⁺ student and they would like to improve to a B and they have a pretty good idea of how to get there, that's a pretty valuable to me.

A motivation for those teachers with an aversion to comparison and lettergrades seems to be a concern about the negative effects of such comparisons on the self-esteem of many students who do not excel (are well above average). This was a concern expressed by parents as well in regard to *younger* children. The rejection of lettergrades is related to the concept of comparison of students to each other and also the fallibility of grades to convey accurate information about student achievement. This was a view not generally shared by parents and some students. In fact many parents and students viewed grades as being *more accurate* than other forms of reporting.

Teachers want to involve students in the assessment of the student's own work in order to cause students take more responsibility for their own learning. The initiatives teachers are taking in this area involve the development of student self-assessment worksheets for students to complete at the conclusion of a learning activity, and the implementation of student-led conferences with parents.

The approaches taken by teachers to developing new forms of reporting and to student self-assessment are illustrative of the entrepreneurial approach teachers have developed in regard to assessment practices. In general, neither the district office nor the principal's office are generating the policy and procedures teachers are to use to assess their students. The development and implementation takes the form of projects which are teacher-based and collegial in nature. However, there is little if any evaluation of the procedures themselves.

There is some unease among parents in regard to the reporting practices used in their children's schools. However some reporting practices are very received by parents - those that inform the parent about their child's performance, abilities and problems that are directly related to school.

The assessment of student achievement is a complex process that is likely to be less than perfect in practice even in the most stable of environments. In the classrooms involved in this study, practice is very much under development and so the environment is dynamic. However it is worthwhile to consider those aspects of practice that could be improved upon. Much of the practice of student assessment is based upon tacit knowledge of teachers and the effectiveness of procedures is implicitly evaluated, if at all. There is a need for the development of explicit descriptions of the learning and development pathways upon which instruction and assessment are based. The pathways are undoubtedly complex and therefore these descriptions will be difficult to develop so that they are comprehensive and comprehensible to teachers and parents. These descriptions will help explicate the expectations of the program and give a base for interpretation and evaluation of student performance.

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APPENDIX A

Focus questions

TEACHERS

WHAT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES DO YOU USE IN THE CLASSROOM?

Collection
Collation
Interpretation
Reporting

FOR EACH OF THE ABOVE PROCEDURES:

Describe what the procedure is.

How does it work

- individual students vs. groups
- how much time?
- how often do you use it?
- when do you use it?
- do you use it across all goal areas?
- For all students?

What are some benefits?

What are some problems?

How do you select the procedures you use?

How do you select the goal areas for assessment of students?

How do you select the student(s) you are assessing at a particular time?

How do you select the information that is relevant to the goal area?

How do you determine whether student performance is adequate?

- in relation to goals?
- in relation to effort expended?
- in relationship to other students?

How are others involved in the procedure?

IN REGARD TO YOUR ASSESSMENT PRACTICES :

How are the results of student assessment used?

What are the functions/purposes of student assessment?

accountability, reporting to parents
instructional feedback

What effects does assessment have on students?

- in classroom during assessment activities
- do they notice, are they aware of assessment as a distinct activity?
- to the results have any impact on students themselves?
- what variation happens across students in your class?

CHANGES

What changes have you made in the assessment of children in your class?

How do you feel about the changes in assessment going on these days?

What difficulties have you encountered?

What benefits?

Have the changes in assessment had any effect on

- your teaching?
- the goals for your students?
- the way you organize your classes?

ADMINISTRATORS

Are there any school policies in regard to student assessment?

- any testing programs - school or district?
- reporting requirements - formats, meetings, etc?

Any in-service or other support provisions for assessment practices at school or district levels?

Any organizational changes or initiatives related to assessment?

- staffing
- scheduling
- student groupings?

Any policies or directions in regard to assessment and students with handicapping conditions?

PARENTS

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES IN THE SCHOOL

When you think of assessment or student evaluation - what kinds of things are going on in your child's classroom?

What kinds of information do you receive about your child?

- written

- other

How often, when?

How do you use this information?

Do you talk with your child about it?

Do you talk with the teacher about it?

The principal?

Others?

In your view what are the purposes of assessment and evaluation?

- should be

- are

STUDENTS

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

What Do The Following Mean To You?

What is it?

How does it happen?

Do you like it?

Assessment

Evaluation

Achievement

Tests

Grades

Reports

Do you have reports your parents read?

What is the purpose of these reports?

Do you talk about them with your parents?

When you get your report, what do you do with it?

- do you read it?

- what part?

- why?