

Performance-Based Assessment: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners

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Performance assessment, a personalized and rigorous alternative to standardized testing, provides an opportunity for teachers to build on individual students' strengths and foster more equitable learning outcomes.

“**M**y eyes glazed over at the reading passages, and I had no idea what the multiple choice questions were about. They try to trick you by making all the answers sound right. It was so boring that I didn’t even try to do my best,” said my tenth-grade daughter the evening after taking the PSAT at school.

A recent *Huffington Post* article by a poet whose work was used in the Texas state middle school assessments underscored the inanity of this type of testing. The poet herself wrote that she did not know the “correct” answers to the questions on the test about her motivations for using stanza breaks, similes, capitalization, and imagery in her own poems. “These test questions were just made up, and tragically, incomprehensibly, kids’ futures and the evaluations of their teachers will be based on their ability to guess the so-called correct answer to made-up questions.” She implores all stakeholders, in all caps, to “STOP TAKING THESE TEST RESULTS SERIOUSLY” (Holbrook 2017).

My daughter is a visual and kinesthetic learner in Boston Public Schools. She is creative, hardworking, and inquisitive, but she does not show most effectively what she knows and can do on traditional paper-and-pencil tests. Her current school, Fenway High School, emphasizes project-based learning and uses performance assessments such as papers, skits, presentations, and debates to determine students’ mastery of content. Students have choices in what they produce, so that they are more engaged in the assignment, which is often rooted in the social, cultural, and everyday lives of teens. Examples include a critical gender and race analysis of a popular music video, a propaganda poster on a topic of her choice (body image), and a policy memo on how police departments could reduce incidents of police brutality against Black and Brown people. The culturally

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responsive pedagogy elevates critical dialogue, collaboration, visual representation, and inquiry, all of which have been shown to be effective instruction and assessment practices (Piazza, Rao & Protacio 2015).

Prior to Fenway, my daughter attended several traditional schools, in which test preparation and testing were the norm and occupied a great deal of instructional time. Homework included mind-numbing exercises with multiple-choice questions in the form of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) or SAT. Last year, she attended one of Boston's exam schools, a selective public high school where admission is based entirely on a student's grades and entrance exam score. Her principal boasted that parents were happy with the school's assessment practices, which did not need to change to meet the needs of diverse learners, because "our students get high SAT scores." However, SAT scores correlate most strongly with family income and education levels (College Board 2013), not the amount of test prep or the "intelligence" of the test taker!

Fueled by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its focus on standardized testing, the U.S. assessment system has been driven by capitalism rather than educational benefit. Annually, the testing industry, which four companies monopolize, is valued at between \$400 and \$700 million. The testing industry drives Americans to spend \$13.1 billion each year on test preparation. Besides the test makers, scorers, and preparation companies, this system is designed to advantage three primary stakeholders: (1) the testing industry's corporate executives, who earn in excess of \$1 million annually; (2) education technology companies, which create online software applications for textbooks, workbooks, curriculum development, formative assessment, and the like; and (3) families, predominantly White, who have the resources to avail themselves of the courses, programs, software, and exposure that lead to higher standardized test scores (Strauss 2015; Alexandra 2016).

My daughter is not alone in her negative experience of traditional assessment. In public schools that are increasingly diverse ethnically, linguistically, and culturally, achievement measurement of the type born of NCLB becomes not only meaningless, but also indefensible: "The acceptance of the reality of diversity is to undermine the possibility for standardized, mass-produced, universally applicable measurement instruments" (Hilliard III 2004).

In this issue of *VUE*, we propose an alternative to standardized testing, whose purpose is to sort and rank students and schools. This alternative, performance assessment, is personalized and rigorous, and improves teaching and learning – thereby benefiting both students and teachers. Against a backdrop of the opportunities provided by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the challenges of a Trump/DeVos education administration seemingly committed to privatizing public education, performance assessment is an opportunity for public schools and districts to better meet the needs of all students and to use more relevant, engaging curriculum and instruction that prepares students for complex problem-solving and collaboration.

The connection between performance assessment and equity remains a hypothesis. We know that standardized tests exacerbate opportunity gaps. Whether performance assessments reduce opportunity gaps and lead to greater equity depends on how they are implemented and used in instruction. Currently, too little evidence exists that performance assessment closes the "achievement gap" for students who have been historically marginalized. However, given that performance assessments

provide increased learning opportunities and deeper engagement, we expect that students who have been underserved by our inequitable systems will do better with performance assessments than with standardized tests, both to inform instruction and to make decisions regarding promotion and graduation. Some articles in this issue of *VUE* highlight how students like English language learners, Native Americans, students of color who live in poverty, and refugees benefit from performance assessments. Other articles focus on supporting implementation of performance assessments through teacher collaboration; school, district, and state networks; innovative uses of technology; and customized, teacher-led professional development.

My hope is that this compilation of perspectives educates and inspires practitioners, researchers, and advocates to make performance assessment systems the norm rather than the exception – not only for my daughter, but for all students with diverse histories and learning styles and for their teachers, whose dialogue, agency, and learning would be transformed.

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