

Can Balanced, Quality Assessment Practices Positively Impact School Culture?
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Having a healthy school culture is what everyone in a school desires. I can sense very shortly after entering a school the state of the culture. Seeing students who love to learn, teachers who love to teach, parents who are happy with their children's learning and principals who lead with confidence and have pride for what occurs in their buildings are to me major indicators of a healthy school culture. Having balanced, quality assessment practices can significantly contribute to such a culture.

Establishing balanced, quality assessment practices throughout a system requires assessment literacy on the part of the individuals in that system. Assessment literacy is not acquired in a workshop or attending one class. It requires that individuals learn together and grow together over time. They learn and grow together by agreeing to study multiple topics on assessment literacy. In addition, they agree to try out these new learned principles and strategies in their classrooms and schools and agree to come back to their learning teams and share what has worked and what has not in order to receive feedback from their colleagues. This descriptive feedback focuses on strengths and areas for improvement, and offers suggestions for further growth. Schools exist as learning organizations for both the students and the adults.

Principals who understand the impact of balanced, quality assessment practices will provide the conditions for teachers to learn together. When principals are assessment literate themselves they can provide useful feedback on assessment practices to their teachers in their daily interactions with them.

We are wired for feedback and when it is done well, we grow in our practices and in our confidence as educators and learners. As our trust in ourselves, in our colleagues, and in our leaders increases we take more risks to continually help each other and our students grow in learning and confidence.

Team learning builds trust among the team members. With trust, team members share their expertise and challenges with each another. The more team members share their expertise and challenges, the more each member's assessing, teaching and feedback practices grow, resulting in more learning for the students. Identifying what works and does not work in assessment creates a vision of quality assessment practices that unites what occurs in assessment from one classroom to another. The buildup of trust, the sharing of expertise, and the consistency of quality assessment practices across classrooms produces a school-wide environment of confidence, pride, dialogue and risk-taking along with equitable opportunities to learn for all students.

To have assessment balance in classrooms, teachers know the purpose for every assessment that is given to the students. Is the information from this assessment for the students, the teacher, the parents, the district, the state? What decisions are to be made with the assessment information? Is everyone getting the information they need to make the needed

decisions on teaching and learning? Is the information to be used to promote learning and/or certify learning? With answers to these questions teachers will know the users and uses for each assessment. To provide equitable opportunities for learning, everyone in the system needs to know if students are learning; i.e., what is working and what is not working for our students in our classrooms and across our schools. With the needed assessment information, individuals from the classroom to the boardroom can work together to provide the necessary conditions and resources so all students can succeed.

When teachers are assessment literate, they know the standards or learning targets students are to master from grade level to grade level or from course to course. Teachers can identify these targets as knowledge, reasoning, performance skill or product targets. Teachers decipher the specific knowledge and skills students must acquire on their journey to mastery of these standards or learning targets. Finally, teachers know what assessment methods will accurately measure these different kinds of targets and are able to build these assessments with quality ingredients.

Teachers and any other educator who administers assessments to students provides the resulting accurate assessment information in understandable language to students and to others who need the information. With the needed information students, teachers, parents, and school, district, and state leaders can make decisions that will ultimately help students learn more. With the free flow of accurate and understandable information, there is transparency of what occurs in our schools and classrooms. This transparency not only provides the needed information to help students grow but it builds trust and confidence among the members of the school community contributing to a healthy school culture.

Lastly, with assessment literacy, students are recognized as critical users of assessment. In the course of the daily lessons, teachers will share with students the purpose for the assessments and the targets being measured on the assessments. Teachers will give students examples of strong and weak work and will teach the students how to critique their own work against those samples. Teachers will give students ongoing descriptive feedback on their work and will teach students how to use the information from the descriptive feedback to self-assess their own work. Once students become adept at receiving and using the feedback to self-assess students can give feedback to each other. With quality assessment information and feedback students can determine what is working for them, what needs improvement and can set a plan for getting better. They can become their own self-advocates in their learning. With student input and quality assessment information teachers can better determine what to teach next for each student and can set up large group, small group, or individual lessons. If the students are engaged, learning, and valued, and as a result, happy, then the school community is happy.

Before becoming an administrator and a consultant, I taught in classrooms for over 20 years. What I shared in this blog about quality and balanced assessments practices I lived as a teacher in many ways. As a teacher, administrator and consultant, what I found to be true, is that adults and students will want to come to teach and learn in their school when they find purpose for being there, are valued as unique individuals with a variety of strengths and needs, have

opportunities for ongoing growth amongst successes and missteps, and see what they do makes a positive difference for themselves and others. Acquiring balance and quality in assessment practices is a powerful means for positively impacting school culture because it defines purpose for assessing, teaching and learning; it builds trust when individuals learn and share with each other and it gives cause for celebrating success in assessment literacy, teaching and learning. When balanced, quality assessment practices provide the school community with the information it needs to bring students to success in their learning, pride and confidence across members of that system will be the result.