

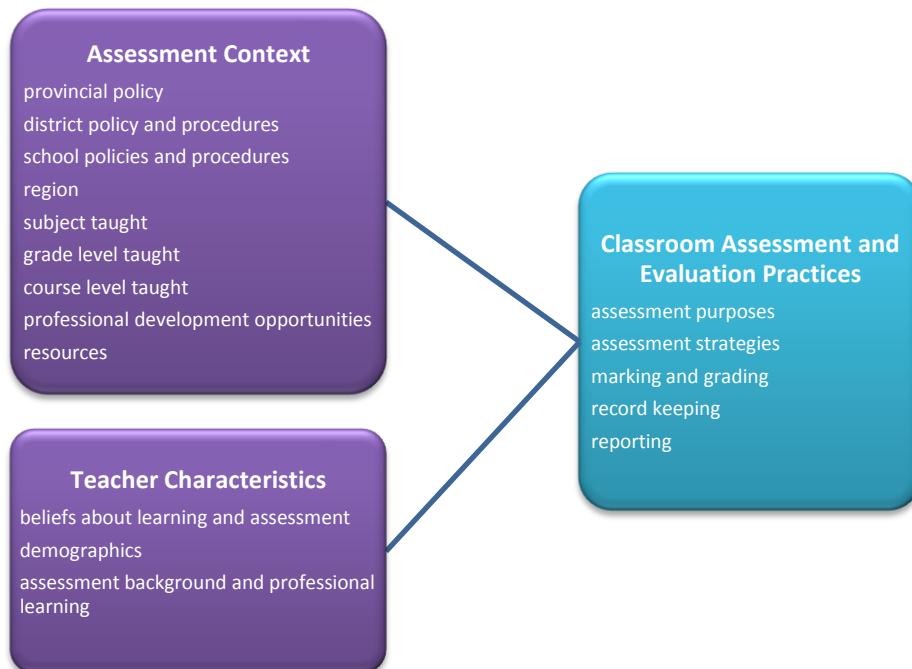
CHAPTER 8 – INSIGHTS AND ISSUES¹

This study is about classroom assessment; the kind of assessment that takes place in every classroom, every day, and is an integral part of the regular interaction between teachers and students. In Ontario, classroom assessment done by teachers is the primary form of assessment in Ontario secondary schools, directed by policy guidelines within each subject area produced by the Ministry of Education. Teachers are the ones who make decisions about what to assess, how to assess, and how to use the results. Classroom assessment is clearly a major professional responsibility.

As described in Chapter 1, assessment and evaluation have become more complex over the past 25 years. Teachers are expected to use assessment not only to report achievement of individuals for certification, progress, and transfer but also to use assessment to support student learning, by adapting instruction and creating the conditions for students to become self-monitoring and take responsibility for their own learning. These increased expectations have brought classroom assessment and grading to the forefront.

Guidelines and policy documents have been issued regularly in Ontario, books and handbooks have been written, and there have been many professional development opportunities related to assessment. However, there is little information available about how teachers are understanding the policies and enacting them in practice. This study was conceived as an opportunity to investigate classroom assessment in secondary schools in Ontario as teachers are experiencing these shifts in policy and practice. Given the increased expectations and demands related to assessment, evaluation, and reporting, the study looked specifically at what secondary teachers actually do in relation to classroom assessment in this more complex environment, and what factors (contextual and personal) influence their practices, according to the theoretical framework described in Chapter 1 and repeated below.

Teacher Voice On Assessment – Theoretical Framework



¹ This is the final chapter in the report *Classroom Assessment in Ontario Secondary Schools: In Teachers' Hands* prepared for the Ontario Teachers Federation by Aporia Consulting Ltd. (2010).

The results for this study are based on responses from close to 6000 teachers (AEFO, OECTA and OSSTF members) in the province who responded to the survey (13% of the population) and from interviews with 72 teachers from 11 publicly-funded schools (6 public, 4 Catholic, and 1 francophone) across the province. The survey sample was found to have similar characteristics (i.e., region, gender, type of contract, and years) to the population of AEFO and OSSTF, and although OECTA was unable to provide provincial data for comparison, the sample was not different from the OTF statistics for all federations/associations taken together. The interviews were with randomly selected teachers in randomly selected schools that were chosen from within each federation/association and were located in all regions of the province and used to exemplify findings from the survey data.

However, given the small sample size, generalizations should be made with caution. Rather than being seen as statements of certainty, these findings provide a starting point for professional conversations and inquiry by teachers, school and district leaders, and policy makers.

This chapter provides a summary of what we have learned, draws together insights, and identifies issues that have emerged².

There are two major aspects to this summary:

- Insights – key findings from the study in relation to classroom assessment and evaluation practices and influences of the external context and teacher characteristics on these practices
- Issues – tensions and dilemmas that became evident in the study

Insights

Classroom Assessment and Evaluation Practices

Regardless of what is written in policy documents or espoused at staff meetings, classroom assessment is ultimately defined by the actual practices of teachers in their classrooms on a daily basis. Describing teachers' assessment practices was the core of this study. Both the survey and the interviews asked the participants to describe their assessment practices, in specific terms, in relation to a particular course or unit that they were currently teaching. In this section, we summarize what we learned about classroom assessment and evaluation practices from this study.

Classroom teachers in Ontario employ a large repertoire of assessment tools. The respondents mentioned projects, oral presentations, assignments (individual and group), writing activities, tests, quizzes, observation, journals, exams, labs and lab reports, position papers, hands-on activities, portfolios, essays, research papers, independent study, performance tasks, homework checks, experiments, building things, interviews, conferences, rubrics, worksheets, and questioning as examples of assessment tools. In some cases, departments used common assessments that teachers developed together.

The purposes for which teachers used these assessment tools are complex. In the survey, most teachers reported that they aligned their assessment with the curriculum (98%), used assessment to identify students' needs (88%), created assessment environments where students felt comfortable taking risks (96%), used assessment to plan subsequent lessons (84%), adapted materials (84%), differentiated instruction (78%), and provided feedback to students using comments (97%), achievement levels (84%) and overall/specific curriculum expectations (73%).

Most teachers surveyed were aware of the importance of students taking more ownership of their own learning. Most reported that they taught students how to set their own goals and monitor their progress (81%), used rubrics (82%) and discussed learning expectations and criteria with their students (89%),

² These results are reported in relation to the literature more extensively in chapters 6 and 7.

used examples to show students exemplars to help them understand the levels of achievement (77%) , encouraged students to view mistakes as learning opportunities (98%), and provided opportunities for students to become self-assessors (75%) and guidance to assess others' work (61%) in order to reflect and identify ways to demonstrate their own learning. A majority of teachers gave students opportunities to set their own learning goals (65%) and used exemplars to teach students how to become more responsible for their learning (59%). Fewer involved students in the development of rubrics (21%).

The most traditional purpose of assessment involves teachers gathering evidence to draw inferences about students' learning to establish grades and prepare reports. Teachers in this study used a wide variety of formal and informal methods to assess the same expectations, and in some instances, the assessments used by teachers were common across departments. Respondents indicated that they communicated the criteria and expectations to students in a variety of ways, aligned their assessments with curriculum expectations (98%), discussed expectations with students (94%), discussed criteria for marking student work (89%), and gave students opportunities to demonstrate their learning across all levels of achievement (98%).

Almost all of the teachers (98%) who responded to the survey were following the Ministry policy of the balance of term work and a culminating activity or final exam, and were using multiple sources of evidence to support the grades they assigned (97%). Although only 23% of the survey respondents included things like effort, attendance, participation or behaviour in determining grades, a number of the teachers who were interviewed said that they wanted the grading to reflect both student effort and achievement. Many of them also gave students extensions for late work without penalty (78%), or let students redo assessments without penalty (60%), although some reduced marks on work submitted late (33%). In determining grades, they replaced old evidence with new (77%), using the most recent and most consistent information to determine grades. 86% contacted parents when issues arose. However, when work was not handed in despite all of these efforts, 83% indicated that they include zero marks for work that was not handed in or tests that had been skipped without good reason.

Although there are some inherent contradictions and tensions between the various purposes of assessment, all of them are governed by students having a clear image of what is expected of them and knowing what they are striving to learn. In this study, learning intentions and criteria were embedded in teachers' practices. Almost all of the teachers who completed the survey aligned their assessments with curriculum expectations (98%), and discussed them with the students (94%), and most gave direct feedback to students, based on the expectations (74%) as well as communicating them to parents (74%).

Influence of the External Context and Teacher Characteristics

In the conceptual model, we hypothesized that teachers' practices could be influenced by both external contextual factors (i.e., geographical region, existence of a board policy, influence from others, subject taught, and students' characteristics) and teacher factors (i.e., teaching experience, professional learning and perceived expertise, and teachers' beliefs about learning and assessment) that may influence teachers' assessment practices. This section describes what we learned about the influence of contextual and personal factors on classroom assessment practices.

The policy context for Ontario secondary schools is one where schools and teachers are the key decision makers and judges of their assessment practices, within policy expectations. They are charged with using assessment to improve student learning, improve the quality of teaching, and report student performance against curriculum objectives to students, their parents, and other interested parties (e.g., employers, post secondary institutions).

Even though they sometimes felt that some of the policies – whether Ministry, school, or department – were too vague or not clear, the practices of teachers in this study were largely guided by policies in

their local district, and they worked hard to comply with the policy directives by developing their own strategies that allowed them to reconcile policy requirements with their own views about assessment.

Although teachers are the ones who make judgements about their assessment and evaluation practices, these decisions are not made in isolation from their colleagues and others who have an investment in their decisions. About half of the teachers who completed the survey felt pressure from students (51%), and were influenced by other teachers (47%) and/or the administration (45%) in relation to their assessment practices. Twenty-two (22%) of respondents reported that they had grades altered by the administration. Many survey respondents also indicated that they consulted with members of the educational team for students with IEPs (86%), and teachers who were interviewed indicated being influenced by the nature of the class they were teaching.

In this study, teachers used similar assessment practices regardless of where they taught in Ontario, what they taught or who they taught. There were only slight differences across geographic regions or by grade, course level or subject taught. Although it might be expected that teachers who have recently entered the profession would have different experiences of assessment and use different practices, this was not evident in this study. There were no differences in this study across assessment purposes when teachers' years of experience were taken into account.

Most teachers in this study had access to professional development workshops and sessions related to classroom assessment. In fact, 97% of respondents had been involved in classroom assessment PD in the last 5 years, and 74% had participated in at least three professional learning activities. In addition, many teachers were also actively engaged in other forms of learning about assessment through reading or on-line resources (64%), working with colleagues (78%), and participating on assessment committees (19%). In a number of the interviews, when queried about what resources they would like to see for phase two of this project (production of resources for use by classroom teachers), teachers mentioned that being able to discuss and share ideas and materials with their colleagues was the most important resource for them.

The teachers in this study were comfortable with holding views of learning that encompassed both a belief in transmission of what is "known", as well as the creation of meaning for "the knower" through a process of subjective interpretation. Although these theories of learning are very different from one another, the teachers in this study accepted both of them and moved back and forth between them, depending on the situation or circumstances.

Issues

Multiple Purposes of Assessment

All of the practices described above are well-intentioned and reasonable practices. However, they don't always fit together easily. Assessment and evaluation are increasingly sophisticated decision making processes, with multiple purposes that are not always compatible with each other. Teachers in secondary schools who have the responsibility for transforming these changes into practice are working to make sense of the changing assessment landscape and are experiencing some tensions and dilemmas in the process.

In this section, we discuss issues that became evident from this study – issues related to the multiple purposes of assessment and challenges in grading practices. Many of these challenges are intertwined and inter-related. Addressing the multiple and sometimes competing purposes requires a differentiated approach to assessment. There is no single activity called "classroom assessment" and there are inherent tensions among the different purposes that are not trivial.

Most teachers in this study were engaged in a wide range of assessment practices that encompass all three purposes – informing learning, developing self monitoring and self assessment, and providing an

accounting to students, parents and others about student learning. However, the teachers who were interviewed were not very explicit about the purpose when they established assessment processes. For the most part, they focused on measuring students' learning for reporting purposes, and thought of assessment as a process of determining students' grades. Routine assessments throughout a course were used to track students' progress and provide practice for a final summative assessment, with formative assessments as preparation and practice for a major summative assessment to come later.

In a few cases, the teachers in the interviews described using assessments to diagnose, build skills and/or indicated that they wanted students to use the assessment to identify their own learning needs and take responsibility for their own learning. However, they described gathering information and recording it for reporting purposes and not explicitly thinking about how to use the information to make decisions about the next steps in instruction and student learning, as a regular part of their practice.

The evidence suggests that many of the teachers are adding a variety of assessment strategies and activities to their practice, although their purposes aren't always clear. This was particularly evident in the teachers' descriptions of their approach to differentiated instruction and using self or peer assessment.

Over 75% of respondents to the survey indicated that they differentiated instruction. Teachers who were interviewed saw differentiation largely as providing accommodations for students and generalized opportunities for students to learn differently. They associated it most often with students with IEPs or who are ESL and needed support either from another teacher, an electronic device, or different tasks based on their exceptional designation. For other students in the class, differentiated instruction meant presenting materials to the whole class in a variety of ways, giving students choice on assignments, providing extra help (often after class), or changing marking and grading procedures. The interviewees did not mention intentionally developing or using assessments as the starting point for deciding what changes they might make.

If the ultimate goal of schooling is that students develop the habits and skills to become life-long learners, they need to develop skills of self-monitoring and self-regulation. Teachers who responded to the survey described using self (75%) and peer assessment (61%) with their classes. The teachers who were interviewed indicated that they used self assessment for students to monitor their preparedness and their learning skills, or engaged students in self or peer marking, without opportunities for reflection. Some of them indicated having some discomfort with self and peer assessment, and felt they were not sure how to use it effectively.

Challenges in Grading

Certainly the most dominant and challenging issues that arose in this study were associated with grading and reporting practices. Although grading and reporting has a long-standing history, recent assessment reform has triggered considerable debate about grading in the literature and among teachers.

Grading is a major professional responsibility that teachers take seriously. Determining grades is not a mechanical process; it is a complex process of reviewing accumulated evidence and using professional judgement to blend a great deal of information into a summary score that represents a student's progress, status and success. Teachers decide what to include in grades and they rely on the evidence that they accumulate formally and informally from their assessments of students in their classes and on their professional judgement, to determine an appropriate grade for each student.

Given the important consequences for students' futures, teachers, researchers, administrators, policy makers, and parents are asking questions such as: what should be included in grades, how should grades be calculated, how accurate are they, how fair are they, and, why are they different for different

classes? These questions reflect the changes in how schools are positioned within society, and the increasing importance of assessment, evaluation, and grading in this more complex environment.

In this study, the tensions were particularly evident around the purposes of grading, what to include in grades, late and missed assignments, and ensuring fairness. Survey respondents held multiple conceptions of learning at the same time, and moved back and forth between them in their work, depending on circumstances. They did the same with assessment and grading, sometimes focusing on using assessment and grading to reinforce learning or effort and sometimes using it to aggregate into a score for reporting purposes. Different teachers had different conceptions and approaches that influenced how they handled the same situations and how they responded to the challenges of addressing the competing demands.

Deciding what information is included in grades is a major issue that is related to the shifts in purpose and the ways grades are interpreted and used. In this study, most of the survey respondents indicated that they did not include effort, participation, tardiness, attendance, and/or adherence to class rules in students' grades (77%). At the same time, 83% gave a zero for assignments that were never handed in, thereby mixing achievement and behaviour/effort in one summary score. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the survey respondents were maintaining records about learning skills that would provide them with the supporting evidence for decisions that they were making about students in relation to learning skills and work habits.

Missed or late assignments, missed tests and academic dishonesty, and frustrations with Ministry and board policies around these topics, were the most contentious issues for teachers in this study. A large majority of the survey respondents (83%) said that they gave a mark of zero for assignments never handed in and/or for skipped tests and/or indicated that they reduced marks for late assignments (33%). For many of the respondents the decision to assign "zeros" came after giving students other chances, such as allowing deadline extensions without penalty (78%), allowing students to redo assignments without penalty (60%), allowing deadline extensions with penalty (35%) and reducing marks on work submitted late (33%).

The teachers who were interviewed indicated disagreement with the thrust of general policy directions discouraging the use of "zero". They had, however, found ways to deal with assignments that were not completed and gave us some insights into the dilemmas that incomplete work created for teachers. They were faced with decisions about what to record when there was no evidence of the student's learning, they were concerned that students were not taking responsibility for managing their time and completing their assignments, and they felt that it was not fair to other students who were working hard and doing the assignments to see their classmates receive passing grades without doing all of the work. The underlying belief seemed to be that if students have not done the work or behaved badly, they should be penalized and a zero would lead to more responsible actions in the future.

Fairness was a recurrent theme in this study. Although most (76%) of respondents felt that assessment is fair to students, almost a quarter of the teachers had misgivings about the fairness of assessments. When teachers in the interviews were asked about fairness, they gave insights into how they used professional judgement to make subtle and nuanced decisions in their efforts to ensure fairness. Their comments illustrated that fairness has many different facets, and means something quite different to different people. In some cases, fairness was about giving students chances by providing support and making adjustments to grading to address the unique circumstances associated with individual students, or even whole classes. In other cases, fairness meant transparency, consistency, and uniformity in how students showed their learning and in how teachers applied the criteria in grading. Some expressed the belief that equal is not always fair; while others worked hard to ensure equal treatment. For some, fairness was closely tied to making the assessments fair. Others attached it to students' effort and compliance, especially developing a good work ethic. For others, it was a matter of equity and justice.

In the interviews, teachers described the emotional and moral struggles associated with reaching decisions that they believed were fair. There was also some concern that the requirements placed on them by their institutions often conflict with what teachers see as the needs of individual students. Although some of them expressed some discomfort with reconciling the expectations placed on them and their views about fairness, the more noticeable distinction was that fairness was seen very differently by different teachers, all of whom believed that they were being fair to their students.

The complex nature of teacher professional judgment and decisions related to grading make it difficult to know the extent to which these decisions adhere to principles of measurement, such as validity, reliability, and transparency. Validity in grading is connected to the accuracy of the interpretation of the grade. It includes the extent to which a grade both reflects what it purports to measure and whether the interpretation of the grade is appropriate. Validity means that the information used to establish the grade covers the key knowledge and concepts, and conveys an accurate picture of the students' learning and progress that is understood by the recipients. Reliability means that grades are consistent, fair, and free from bias and distortion. Transparency involves giving students and their parents detailed information so that they have a clear and shared understanding, not only of what learning is expected in the course, but also the criteria by which student learning will be assessed and the rules that are being applied when decisions are made about the learning. It also requires assurance that the judgments are supported by evidence so that everyone involved can have confidence in the results.

In this study, most teachers were providing students (94%) and parents (74%) with descriptions of the intended learning and criteria for success. Within the scope of this study it was not possible to determine how much information students and parents received about how the teachers used the criteria to arrive at grades. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they followed the Ministry policy of a balance of term work and culminating activity or final exam (98%), and used multiple sources of evidence for coming to the final grade (97%). From the interviews, it was clear there were large variations among teachers. Although the grade on a report card is numerical, and is interpreted as if each teacher uses the same criteria and the same process to determine the assigned grade, teachers use many different approaches in their grading practices.

Understanding the Issues

It is clear that secondary teachers are balancing a number of different considerations as part of their assessment and grading practices. Not only do they have to differentiate between formative and summative assessment; they also have to get grading right so that communication about students supports wise and defensible decisions. There will inevitably be variability in what teachers do and how they make decisions related to assessment and grading, because different teachers are situated in different contexts, and have different philosophies, beliefs and perspectives about what matters in grading. It is important to understand the tensions that exist for teachers and the different perspectives and theories that underpin them.

There are no simple mechanisms or policy directives that will ensure reliability, validity and fairness. Student learning is a complex phenomenon, and assessment and evaluation of student learning requires professional judgement that is by nature subjective, to some extent. It may not be possible to make classroom assessment absolutely reliable, valid and fair, but it is possible to make it more reliable, more valid and fairer. The challenge for education is to recognize that assessment and grading are human and cultural issues, not just technical ones, acknowledge their essential subjectivity, and unveil the mystery of the assessment and grading process by being open about the design of assessments, the purposes of assessments, and the scoring and grading processes so that the decisions are transparent. This more complex assessment environment requires that not only teachers, but policy makers and school leaders gain deeper understanding of assessment and grading purposes and processes, and how they can be enacted in practice.

This research study is the first stage of the OTF project. The second stage is the production of resources and tools for secondary teachers in Ontario to use for professional learning. As outlined in Chapter 5, effective professional learning happens when teachers work together to reflect on and extend their own practices. When asked about the kind of professional learning that they valued, teachers in this study indicated that they wanted to learn with and from one another, and that they would like to engage in more, and more intensive, professional learning that involved interaction over a period of time with colleagues.

Professional learning is an active process of systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of practice for student engagement, learning and well-being, as teachers untangle the issues in ways that make sense to them. This inquiry process has many parallels to the formative assessment practices that have been found to be effective in promoting student learning and the same processes are applicable to promoting teacher learning. Teachers frame their own learning by identifying goals for both themselves and their students; they create partnerships with those who have expertise to ensure their learning is focused and achieves desired goals; and they generate information about the progress they are making so that they can monitor and adjust their learning.

In Teachers' Hands

In the changing educational landscape, classroom assessment is being expected to serve a wider range of purposes and communicate more information to students, parents and others than it has ever done before. Assessment and grading have been recognized as powerful mechanisms for helping students learn, as well as for certification of their competence.

As can be seen from this study, changing, extending, and differentiating the purposes of classroom assessment is a complex and sophisticated undertaking. Certainly, teachers in Ontario secondary schools are working hard to understand the power of assessment and to change their assessment and evaluation practices to take advantage of this new learning, and have embraced many of the strategies and practices of using assessment in more complicated contexts. They have also indicated a strong interest in engaging in more focused and intensive professional learning and taking advantage of assessment resources.

Teachers are not novices when it comes to classroom assessment. Many of them have considerable expertise based on years of experience and practice. However, there are many shifts occurring in assessment and evaluation policies and practices. Making sense of the changes in assessment encompasses shifts not only in teachers' practices but also in their beliefs and knowledge, as they move from perceiving assessment information as something separate from teaching and learning processes to seeing the information as an integral part of it for both themselves and their students.