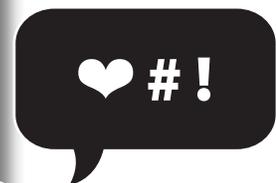
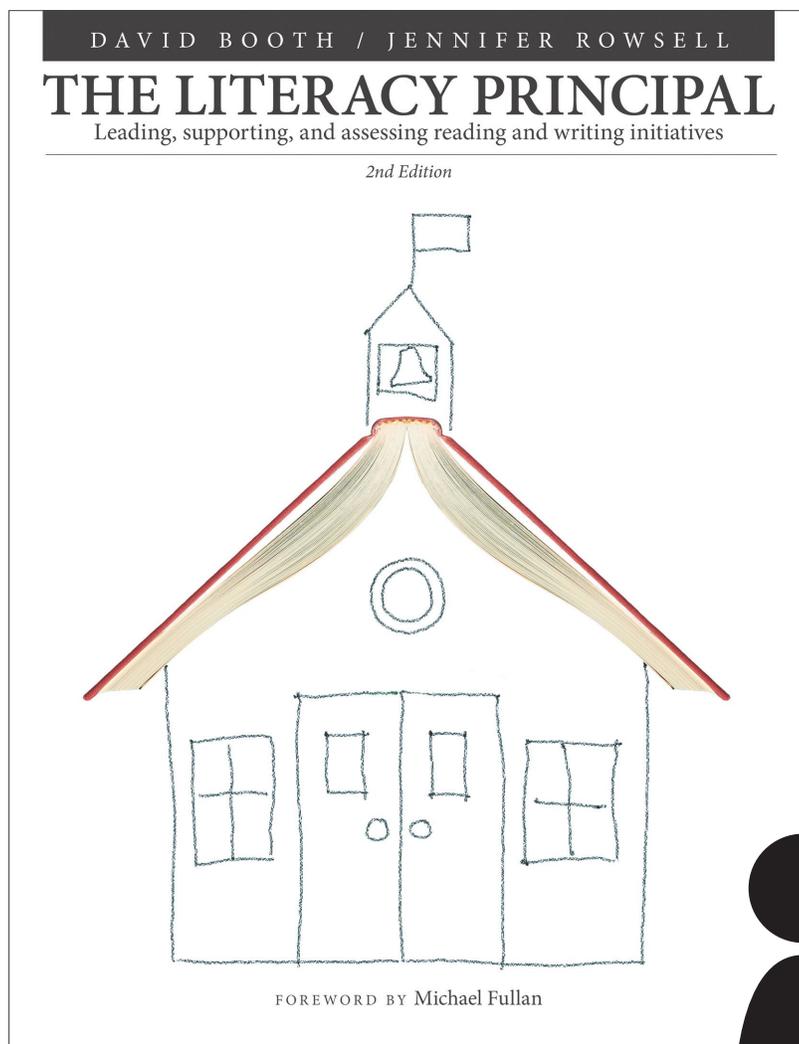


Assessment From the Inside Out

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CHAPTER 4

Assessing from the Inside Out

“Principals need to understand assessment in a variety of ways. I think principals need to be really effective models of assessment portfolios and reflective practice, demonstrating to teachers that effective assessment can happen with everyone in a school, especially if the principal is modeling the process all the time.”—Susan Schwartz

We are well into a new era where innovative societies are not only sustained by a limitless supply of ideas and imagination, but also by the ability to comprehend, compute, and convey them. Literacy facilitates all of these activities and, in turn, fosters a nation’s standard of living and quality of life. It is the great enabler.

Frank McKenna, Deputy Chairman, TD Bank Financial Group

It is clear that assessment and evaluation are priorities in current literacy initiatives, and therefore fundamental to your job as a literacy principal. Assessment and evaluation take on different guises depending on the nature of the program, from informal tools such as observations or running records, to more formal tools such as diagnostic tests or compulsory standardized tests. It is essential that you, as lead advocate for your school, understand the content implications of these methods and tests and how each type supports students’ learning.

Schools represent communities of independent people who meet daily throughout the year for the betterment of all. To unite your learning community, your job as a literacy principal entails building an assessment and evaluation program that represents the heterogeneous needs of its people, while at the same time establishing a common philosophy that underpins your reading and writing curriculum. The two forces can work in unison if your program of assessment and evaluation speaks to independent student needs *and* accords with the philosophy of your overall literacy framework. In their book *A Teacher’s Guide to Standardized Reading Tests*, Calkins, Montgomery, and Santman contend:

Schools need to reach out for tools to conduct our assessment sitting side by side with children.

What underlies all assessment and evaluation are three fundamental principles of good teaching — be active, be reflective, and be collaborative.

In a research report on literacy issued in 2007 by the TD Bank Financial Group, the authors summarize the effect of literacy on the workforce:

Literacy is a core ability to function in today’s economy and society. For example, individuals with higher literacy scores are more likely to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education. They are more likely to succeed at college or university. After finishing their formal education, individuals with higher literacy skills are more likely to enter the labour market and to find gainful employment. (*Literacy Matters: A Call for Action*, p. 11)

Assessing and Evaluating the Whole Picture

“I visited a school last week, and was reminded that I always felt that I knew my students, but I think if I had a new school, I would try to know them even better. I would know their reading levels; I would know what they are reading and writing. This school we visited had 1100 kids in elementary, and the principal knew every single student in Kindergarten and Grades 1, 2, and 3, and the different levels they had achieved according to their learning records. In my school, I knew those who were really struggling and the ones in between, but I did not know the others that well. I think today you have to do more if you want to be an effective teacher/leader.”

— Susan Schwartz

Rick Stiggins and Ruth Sutton both use the terminology that clearly connects assessment with the learning process.

There are as many views about assessment and evaluation as there are about acquiring literacy skills. Some educators adhere to a philosophy of reading assessment that only rigorous, long-standing diagnostic tests like the Gates–MacGinitie Reading Test can measure student progress. Although these tools carry some validity and reliability when combined with other methods, they should not be used exclusively as a reflection of a student’s abilities. Instead, we promote adopting more of a mosaic of formal and informal assessment tools to evaluate student progress and to thoroughly support student learning.

Before outlining specific assessment tools to help your school build a strong reading and writing curriculum, we will define some key terms you will need to construct a curriculum that matches your school’s, your teachers’, and your students’ needs. To clarify the two terms: *assessment* is the gathering, recording, and analysis of data about a student’s progress and achievements or a program’s implementation or effectiveness; *evaluation* is the application of judgment to the data gathered and its analysis, in order to place a “value” on progress, achievement, or effectiveness.

Assessment is therefore undertaken to assess the strengths and needs of a student. Essentially there are three general sources of assessment evidence in classrooms — observations of learning, products students create, and conversations about literacy development. Based on such assessment data, teachers can then make informed decisions about their overall program to determine whether or not the original objectives and approaches they set out were appropriate, and to make modifications so that the program satisfies the needs of individual students and the class as a whole. Evaluation, as Anne Davies points out in *Making Classroom Assessment Work*, comes in many forms, from descriptive feedback to more formal evaluative feedback that identifies how a student performed compared to others.

The three major types of assessment that teachers should integrate into their literacy framework include

- *Diagnostic assessment*, which can be undertaken at any time during the year to evaluate the progress of particular students and to decide whether they require some form of intervention
- *Formative assessment*, which is ongoing assessment that occurs at any time in the year to identify difficulties quickly and to provide an opportunity for immediate remedial action
- *Summative assessment*, which occurs at the end of a unit, course, or program

There is now another set of terms that parallels, in some ways, the list of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment: assessment *for* learning (combining diagnostic and formative) and assessment *of* learning (summative). Some authors are now combining the two into a process called “assessment *as* learning.”

The purpose of all of these types of assessment is to examine students’ achievements in relation to some standard of excellence or in relation to some body of knowledge. It gives the teacher information about where to go next with program and instruction (for individual students and/or for the class as a whole). The ideal program of assessment and evaluation for any reading and writing curriculum outlines a process of ongoing observations of children’s development

with modifications and/or interventions when the need arises. Just as we need a wide repertoire of ways to help children learn to read and write, so too we should use a repertoire of assessments to evaluate all aspects of their progress so that we take into account both their strengths and their weaknesses.

Understanding Standardized Tests

Calkins, Montgomery, and Santman define a standardized test as *a test in which people are measured in a uniform way*. In their work, the authors describe *positive* types of standardized tests, such as criterion-referenced tests, and *negative* types of standardized tests, such as norm-referenced tests. According to Calkins et al., the problem with norm-referenced tests is that they are designed to produce scores that fall on a bell curve; to do this they are pre-tested by students who are supposed to represent the national average. Herein lies the problem with norm-referenced tests: they assume that all students learn at the same pace and are from a similar background. Criterion-referenced tests, on the other hand, reflect standards that have been set by such national organizations as the National Council of Teachers of English. Hence they measure what students know and can do through a variety of performances, rather than by relying solely on more of a paper-and-pencil format. What is crucial to find out about a standardized test is its construct validity; construct validity refers to how well a test measures what it purports to measure.

Assessment is not cut and dried; it is not a process whereby you simply identify students who need help and commend those who are doing well. It is a complex and well-researched field of inquiry that defies standardization. Nonetheless, standardized testing is now part of teachers' and students' reality, and hence a vital aspect of your role as a model of literacy.

Provincial and state governments maintain that the goal of standardized tests lies in comparing results among schools and school boards. In theory, such an approach, as the Ontario Ministry of Education explains, *helps to identify areas that need improvement and target resources accordingly*. What “testing for a better tomorrow” means for you, as a harbinger of change, is a new dimension to your planning and monitoring of a school-wide literacy initiative that not only matches teacher and student needs but also meets curricular outcomes and expectations. Choreographing a literacy initiative in your school at times places you in a divided position because you face conflicts between meeting policy demands versus student and teacher demands.

Government tests are no doubt here to stay, but how we handle the process may determine many of the literacy outcomes for our students. School leaders have a significant role to play in setting the context for learning in school systems using standardized or norm-referenced assessments. To address the realities of teaching today, principals must recognize the underlying assumptions of standardized tests and decide how both informal and formal assessment methods can be built into a school's reading and writing curriculum.