

*Standardized Assessment, Assessment Literacy, and Formative Assessment Practices*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This document examines the history of educational policy from both a federal and state perspective, especially in terms of standardized testing and related accountability and assessment practices, and it serves to both reflect upon and proactively think about the role assessment literacy can and should play in the education system. As educational methods and understanding changes, shouldn't both testing and the way we talk about it change as well? To best promote the educational success of students, stakeholders like parents, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers should be thinking about education and the art of learning through the lens of assessment literacy and formative assessment practices, not through quantitative and arbitrary measures of accountability and achievement. The following paper serves as my mission statement and general educational philosophy about educating children through the viewpoint of being an assessment literate pre-service educator. The conclusions of this paper call for continued research into the ways that assessment literacy and related formative practices can shape the discussions and perceptions about standardized assessment in ways that benefit student learning above all else.

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## Table of Contents

Process Analysis Statement.....	1
Part One: Introduction and Assessment	
Purpose of Assessment.....	4
Part Two: Assessment Literacy and Assessment Literate Individuals	
Assessment Literacy.....	7
Assessment Literate Students.....	8
Assessment Literate Parents/Guardians and Families.....	11
Assessment Literate Educators.....	14
Assessment Literate Administrators.....	17
Assessment Literate Policy Makers.....	21
Part Three: The Breakdown of Assessment	
Summative Assessment (Assessment of Learning).....	23
Formative Assessment (Assessment for Learning).....	25
Formative Assessment (Assessment as Learning).....	28
Part Four: Implications and Conclusion.....	30
Work Cited.....	35

## Process Analysis Statement

I've wanted to be a teacher since I was a young kid. I used to pretend to be the teacher for my class of stuffed animals, Barbies, and other toys, and it certainly inspired my passion and career path as of today. This activity was not only fueled by my love of playing pretend and imagining different scenarios, but also by the fact that both of my parents were, and still are, teachers. My father is a professor, and throughout my childhood it wasn't at all uncommon to see him sitting on the patio in the evening, reading books, and scrawling notes on scraps of paper. My mother has worked in preschools since before I was born, and after getting her Masters degree when I was in 5th grade, took a job as a director of a preschool in the town we moved to when I was 3 years old. Both sides of my family are also full of educators, and so it's no surprise that I loved school, did fairly well in it, and wanted to become a teacher when I grew up.

My decision to teach English was finalized in high school, after experiencing the magic of one of the most influential educators I know to this day, my sophomore year English teacher. I was obsessed with the way she taught: with passion, intentionality, and an evident love and respect for both her students and the curriculum she was using. From then on, after graduation and into my first few years of college education at Ball State University, I was hooked. I wanted to end up with the same amount of dedication and passion towards teaching that I had seen modeled in my educators throughout my educational career, and I knew that a lot of that came from fully immersing myself in understanding the current politics and structure of the educational system.

My golden opportunity to do just that came in the spring of my freshman year, when Dr. Lynne Stallings' immersive learning course caught my eye. Marketed as an exploration and

understanding of the world of standardized testing through the lens of assessment literacy, it seemed like the perfect course for me to get to know the nitty gritty of arguably one of the most controversial and touchy subjects in education - standardized tests. Little did I know, the semester-long Virginia Ball Center course would spark a point of passion and inquiry in my educational career, and it would cause me to be constantly thinking about the things I learned in relation to my course content. I was invested in the world of standardized testing, assessment literacy, classroom practices and pedagogy, and the politics and general messiness of the education system at the local, state, and federal levels.

I knew I wanted to craft my thesis around the things that had sparked my interest in Dr. Stallings' immersive learning course, and I was beginning to realize that a lot of my insights and queries were overlapping in ways that added to the complexity of understanding. So many aspects in this topic overlap and support each other, and before actually beginning to work on the content of this project, I was unsure about what I wanted to discuss and not discuss. I had initially proposed to look deeply into the history of my school system and the Muncie Community School system to discuss the effects (potentially both positive and negative) of standardized testing, but as I began to dive into what I had learned through my research and readings, it became clearer to me that a project designed to provide a complete and accurate summary of such research would be much more beneficial. I felt that what I had learned and was continuing to explore had the potential to be extremely impactful to understanding and talking about assessment practices.

Over a period of time that was marked with wrestling about the most effective and impactful way to organize my ideas, my research, and my questions, I began to think about my

thesis as a vehicle for other preservice educators and educational stakeholders to begin to understand and come in contact with the same things I had learned. This is so important because so much of the important things about assessment literacy gets lost in the conversations about standardized testing and accountability, and it's critical to refocus that conversation. I rely heavily on the work and research of a few key groups, including the Indiana Department of Education and the Michigan Assessment Consortium because they have begun to lead the way on this task. I'm appreciative of the work they're doing, and I hope that this body of work can contribute to the goal of assessment literacy as well.

I'd like to think that my final product is both a digestible and impactful document that has implications on the discussion and interpretation of standardized assessment and formative practices. Ideally, this document serves to relate my understanding and insights in a way that encourages and equips students, parents, educators, administrators, and policy makers with a foundational understanding of the importance of assessment literacy in the conversations around standardized testing, accountability measures, student learning, and so on. Although assessment literacy isn't a widely discussed concept, I'm hopeful that this thesis and the process of creating it and synthesizing existing research about this topic allows for a broader range of understanding about standardized assessment. Ultimately, my goal is to support students in their learning through whatever means necessary, and the process of crafting this thesis has solidified for me the importance of assessment literacy and formative practices in achieving that goal.

## **Part One: Introduction and Assessment**

### **Purpose of Assessment:**

In 1965, president Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as part of his War on Poverty initiative. The act emphasized equal access to education and established the now traditional concept of accountability. The academic success of American students was a growing topic of importance, as we were engaged with the rhetoric of the Cold War. The role of accountability was to ensure quality education for American students, solidifying the idea that American students were smart and relatively unbeatable intelligence-wise. The act was reauthorized every 3 years with additional emphasis being placed on how funds were allocated. In 1981, the Reagan administration passed the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act, which marked a massive change in the education world. The act made it so that the power to control the allocation of educational resources moved from the federal government to the state government, meaning that individual states were able to allocate resources as they wished.

In 1999, under the Clinton administration, the GOALS 2000 act was passed, which set goals for standards-based educational reform, something we see even today. The No Child Left Behind Act, commonly known as NCLB, was passed in 2001 under the Bush administration, which further supported the 1999 efforts of standards-based educational reform on the premise of setting high standards and identifying measurable outcomes. NCLB required states to develop and reform their assessments and basic standards, and it also set in place the mandate that in order to receive federal school funding, schools had to give students 95% of these assessments. This was met with quite a lot of resistance from schools, and in 2002, the National Education Association, backed by several states, sued the government because standardized testing was costing states billions of dollars.

In 2009, President Obama created Race to the Top, a US Department of Education grant that was created to fund and reward schools that participated in innovation and reform in regards to educational policy. R2T, as it was commonly known, began to shift the focus of educational policy and activities on to grades and quantitative measures of teacher effectiveness. R2T was a points based system that encouraged schools to begin focusing their initiatives on creating a more competitive and performance based environment that directly ties in with the drive for schools to achieve high test scores as a sign of success.

The Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, was passed in 2015 by President Obama. ESSA modified NCLB, stating the standardized test scores could not be the only factor that was used to evaluate schools. States also were given more control over their standards, but the standards had to be submitted for approval. Compared to NCLB, ESSA was a godsend for educators across the country. A Huffington Post article from 2017 credited an educator with this quote, “Let’s say you were kidnapped and kept in a small basement where you were routinely beaten and starved. Then after years of this treatment, your captors brought in a massage table and offered you a filet mignon after your spa treatment”. The harsh wording of this statement gives a brief insight to just how teachers felt during the transition from NCLB and ESSA, and it expresses the frustration and constriction educators across the country felt under NCLB.

There’s no doubt that assessment and standardized testing have melded in perhaps a myriad of unexpected ways. Because of the tumultuousness of the topic of assessment and standardized testing, the topic has been relegated to something viewed as somewhat of a necessary evil in the educational process. Most educators share a common disdain for assessment, accountability measures, and strict standards and curriculum, and rightly so. These

aspects constrict the learning and teaching process in ways that make the job of educators a much more difficult task than necessary, partially because the practices of and the rhetoric around accountability measures have been dramatically warped by the false perception of the roles they must play in assessment and educational success generally. It makes sense that standardized tests and assessment have become deeply intertwined, but in addition to the common criticism hurled at the issue, it undercuts what assessment should really be about - learning.

What is lost by focusing only on testing, is understanding and prioritizing the valuable role of assessment in the process of learning, which can be capitalized on by stakeholders who understand the concepts of assessment literacy. Using assessment literacy as a tool to unpack the role that assessment can and should play in the educational world, it can be a shared understanding between students, parents, educators, administrators, and policy-makers that assessment is a vital part of good instruction and student success, and that, when used correctly, can be a tool that provides a wide variety of information through good practice.

In the following sections, I will attempt to explain how the tense atmosphere around testing and assessment that we're experiencing today can be alleviated by the concept of assessment literacy and good practices based on its ideals. After defining key terminology, unpacking the various roles stakeholders must play for the success of all involved, and diving deeper into the subsets of assessment, I hope to sum up why the current assessment practices and the testing environment of today are unsuitable for the type of learning and growth students need, as well as unable to do exactly what current legislation believes assessment can do. We have a duty to our students, educators, schools, and communities to lean into the tried-and-true educational research and practices that have proven much more beneficial than today's world of

high-stakes standardized testing overload, and we have a duty to promote learning over quantitative measures of success.

## **Part Two: Assessment Literacy and Assessment Literate Individuals**

### **Assessment Literacy:**

Generally speaking, the label of being assessment literate is applied to anyone who understands their role in the assessment process and is able to actively and effectively exercise their knowledge of assessment in ways that strengthen student learning and growth. Similar to the concept of financial literacy, defined loosely as being aware and knowledgeable of the financial world and practices that would increase financial stability, assessment literacy relates to being knowledgeable about the assessment world and practices that would increase student success. The Michigan Assessment Consortium (or MAC for short) states that “assessment literacy is the set of beliefs, knowledge, and practices about assessment that lead a teacher, administrator, policymaker, or students and their families to use assessment to improve student learning and achievement” (2). Similarly, the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) states that “assessment literacy includes three big ideas: what someone knows about assessment, what someone believes about assessment, and what someone does with assessment”. In short, assessment literacy is the knowledge of the principles of assessment practices, application, and interpretation that are deemed likely to influence educational decisions and student learning and growth.

### **Assessment Literate Students:**

Contrary to popular belief across the board, assessments are effective when they are applied correctly and when they focus on assessing only one thing at a time, and it's important for students to understand this truth. It's common for students to fall prey to the rhetoric that all assessment is bad, meaningless, or a prescription for punishment, and a large part of assessment literacy is dismantling that belief and replacing it with the truth. Assessment literacy plays a critical role in correcting that rhetoric. One of the first aspects of assessment literacy can be seen in students themselves. Of course, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader is not expected to have the same understanding of the various aspects of assessment that a high school student would have, but in general, there are a few key things that an assessment literate student understands about their learning and participation in assessment practices.

#### An Assessment Literate Student Believes...

- Assessments serve a wide variety of purposes and provide a variety of information.
- Students can and should have agency, empowerment, and control in their own learning.
- The goal of assessment shouldn't be to receive a letter grade, but to continue learning.
- Feedback and other resources are critical aspects of a student's learning process.

Firstly, an assessment literate student understands that assessments provide different information for different purposes. Fundamentally, students should understand that there are a variety of things to be learned, for both themselves and others, from taking quality assessments, and that each assessment given to them should be designed to provide critical information to stakeholders, including themselves. Beyond that, students may grow to understand the more

specific truths that assessments can and should show measures of achievement and learning, provide measures of accountability and grading, or be useful in predicting future learning and growth.

Secondly, and importantly, assessment literate students grow to understand that their learning is something they have agency in. This is in direct contrast with the all-too-common practice in today's schools where students aren't always sure they have any sort of agency in their learning and success, which leads them to detach from the learning process in a way that is detrimental to their metacognition and comprehension. Today's students are focused on the single grades they receive at the end of projects or semesters, and they have removed themselves as critical components in the learning process to instead focus solely on often arbitrary letter grade results. In contrast, an assessment literate student begins to capitalize on concepts of self-reflection and self-assessment, as modeled to them by their parents and teachers, and they begin to have a better sense of empowerment and control in regard to their learning and success. Instead of worrying that they are calling into question a teacher's authority, students are actually capitalizing on their agency to ask questions and drive the learning process. Students should begin to understand that self-monitoring can improve their performance in day to day assessments and on larger standardized tests. They will also realize that having ownership over their learning allows them to keep track of their learning over time, which is a powerful motivator for continued success.

Understanding the importance of their involvement in their learning, students will be drawn to the various tools and resources they have around them, including educators. An assessment literate student learns from teacher feedback, provided through a variety of forms

including appropriate rubrics, written, or verbal communication. Students will be able to assess their own work with the provided feedback from their teacher, and they will be able to take part in deciding next steps for improvement in achievement. Similarly, they will be able to better interpret their results on various assessments and use the results to reflect on their own learning and set appropriate goals for future learning that are supported and affirmed by parents and teachers.

Finally, an assessment literate student should progress throughout their educational career with a growing understanding of the learning process, the impact of their performance, and an idea of growth and achievement. An assessment literate student isn't focused on the idea of grades as a reward, but understands that learning lies beyond those things, and that, through appropriate assessment practices, the reward is continued growth and understanding. These practices and attributes may seem hard to teach and even harder to reach, but it's important to understand that developing assessment literate students is a large-scale effort that includes parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers, all of whom should be assessment literate as well. The following sections detail how each of these education stakeholders can become assessment literate to continue to promote learning and rewrite the narrative around standardized tests and assessments.

### **Assessment Literate Parents/Guardians and Families:**

Parents, like their students, can become overwhelmingly grade-focused and easily lose sight of what it means to put assessment practices in perspective. Students and families across the country are seemingly innately wired to find comfort and assurance in letter grades, percentages, awards and accolades, GPA, class rank, etc., and this mentality furthers the

narrative that assessment should be for something other than learning. For parents/guardians to be assessment literate, it's critical that they begin to move past this mentality in a way that promotes the understanding that their focus should be on the learning process and progress of their students, one that is ultimately fueled by effective assessment practices.

An Assessment Literate Parent/Guardian and Family Believes...

- Assessments and feedback are important parts of their student's learning experience.
- Parents/guardians play a critical role in supporting their student's educational journey.
- The purpose of assessment is to support learning and set learning goals.
- Parents/guardians need to be continually learning to support their student.
- Parents/guardians should be involved in and advocating for their student's education.

The next step up from the student is their support system at home. The family dynamic of course plays a big role in the educational health and success of a student, and this is true for promoting assessment literacy in a student as well. In order to best support the student in their journey to become assessment literate, the parent(s) or guardian(s) need to be able to have a similar understanding of the role that assessment plays in their child's educational career, and they also need to understand how they are a large part of that success as well, even from outside of the school building. Understanding their role in their student's educational success from the beginning to the end of their student's educational career, is a critical aspect of their own assessment literacy.

The Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) promotes the idea of assessment literacy for parents/guardians with the understanding that the way that families talk about assessment will change over time as their student moves from the elementary to secondary level. Assessment literate families with elementary aged students are to believe that students do in fact learn from taking quality assessments and that the feedback provided by the child's teacher is beneficial for student learning as well (MAC). For parents/guardians to be at all on board with their child's learning, they need to fully believe in a quality and effective educational process, which includes feedback and assessment. Parents/guardians must also know the different reasons for taking assessments, which is rooted in the fundamental knowledge that different types of assessments provide different types of information about what their student knows and can do (MAC). Understanding the purpose for assessment allows parents/guardians to be on-board with their student taking assessments, which is a critical checkpoint for assessment literacy. Parents/guardians must also know how to use assessment results their student receives to reflect on their learning and to help set goals (with the help of student and teacher) for future learning (MAC).

For families with secondary-aged students, much of the same information applies. Differences include the fact that parents/guardians can begin to encourage and support their students in using self-monitoring tactics to improve their achievement (MAC). As the student ages and progresses in their knowledge and ability, much of the role of the assessment literate parent or guardian comes through a shift of control, as the student themselves is becoming more active in their assessment literacy and educational journey, which can be seen in the previous section. Family members will also need to become more aware not only that there are different

types of assessments, but they need a better understanding of what these types of assessments are, like selected response, constructed response, performance, and personal communication (MAC). This further allows them to be more informed in the assessment activities occurring in their student's classroom, which is beneficial to furthering levels of assessment literacy.

Parents/guardians should have the knowledge and ability to talk with their student's teacher and school about the types of assessments their student is getting. Essentially, the MAC stresses that as students progress in their understanding throughout their time in the educational system, family members grow in their understanding of assessment as well. This sets them up to be excellent advocates and supporters of their student and their student's success.

Other key qualities of an assessment literate parent is their understanding of the process that is in motion with their student's education, as well as how to engage themselves in that process in a productive manner. An assessment literate parent understands the rights they have to know what and how their student is doing in school, and they should be capitalizing on their right to ask questions and engage with their student, their teacher, and their school. Parents also have the unique ability to be advocates not only for their student, but for their student's teacher, their student's school, and any other aspect of the education system that both directly or indirectly impacts the success of their student, especially if they know what kinds of questions to ask, fueled by their assessment literacy. An assessment literate parent understands the impact they can have when they speak up for the things they know to be beneficial for their student and the community they engage with. They can also be critical in promoting accountability for their student, the school, and policy makers themselves, because they understand the direct connection they have to their student's success in school. In terms of educational reform and success, an

assessment literate parent or guardian is a school system's biggest ally, and it is critical that today's families are given the opportunity to take the first steps to reaching and maximizing their assessment literacy.

### **Assessment Literate Educators:**

Perhaps not surprisingly, educators also play a very important role in the education system, and this is true when they are both assessment literate and not. One might argue that they play a negatively impactful role when they continue to perpetuate the dialogue around assessment that fits in with the current rhetoric, which is solved by providing educators with the knowledge and ability to become assessment literate. I personally sympathize with the plight of preservice educators and educators who have not been taught about the concepts of assessment literacy and haven't been trained with the ideas of assessment literacy in mind. These educators are essentially trapped in the current system that misunderstands and misconstrues the value of proper assessment, and they subsequently further the misunderstanding and misapplication of such ideas, albeit rather unknowingly. Luckily, many of the goals and ideals of assessment literacy naturally interlace themselves with good pedagogy and practices, and it's the simple act of providing educators with the proper foundation and understanding and acknowledging these two forces that has the ability to transform the classroom into a space that functions in a successful way.

#### An Assessment Literate Educator Believes...

- Proper application of assessment is extremely beneficial for the student and teacher.

- Quality assessment is linked with quality classroom practices and instruction.
- Grading is a tool to be used purposely and intentionally.
- Assessments have a variety of purposes and can be used in a variety of ways.
- Correctly and effectively interpreting and acting upon results is critical.

The MAC states that assessment literate teachers believe that assessment, when done correctly, can provide information that helps in the creation of sound educational decisions, provides information about a particular student or school, and provides avenues for continued growth for both student and teacher. Teachers need to understand that quality assessments, especially classroom assessments, are tied directly to quality classroom instruction, and that being assessment literate allows for quality assessments to provide key data for teacher use (MAC).

Educators who become assessment literate also begin to have a revolutionary shift in their understanding of the process and impact of grading and assessment in general. What aids in this shift is the knowledge that there are a variety of different purposes for student assessment, including student improvement, instructional program improvement, student, teacher, or system accountability, program evaluation, and the prediction of future performances or achievement (MAC). This knowledge forces a shift in the way an assessment literate educator both uses and grades assessments, allowing them to be more conscious and more purposeful in their actions. Another pivotal point of understanding for an assessment literate teacher is that they know the definitions of and uses for different types of assessments, like summative assessments, interim benchmark assessments, formative assessments, and criterion vs norm referenced assessment

interpretations (MAC). More about these assessments will be mentioned later, but for now, it's critical to understand that an assessment literate teacher is well-versed in these practices, has a sharp understanding of their individual purposes, and knows how to engage with students through these various avenues.

Assessment literate teachers also have a nontechnical understanding of a few statistical concepts associated with assessment, including validity (how much an assessment measures what it was designed to measure) and reliability (a measure of the consistency of results from an assessment), and they have the ability and the proper knowledge to use and create effective scoring guides that aid in the assessment and feedback process (MAC). They then have the ability to use assessment results in appropriate ways to modify instruction or to improve student achievement, depending on the original goal of the assessment. This is especially important in conjunction with remembering that assessments of any kind can only serve one purpose at a time, and it's up to an assessment literate teacher to understand and honor that within their work. Of course, the teacher also has the responsibility of properly and effectively communicating to students, parents/guardians, other teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders about student learning (MAC).

Within the classroom, assessment literate educators understand how to select the appropriate level curriculum to teach to their students, appropriate assignments and assessments based on intended purpose, and the tools to aid learning for each individual student. This plays into the careful use of assessments, because teaching and daily instruction should be playing directly into the assessments designed or selected by the educator. An assessment literate educator should be a master at selecting, implementing, and responding to all aspects of different

assignments and assessments they give to students, proving their understanding of the power that instruction and assessment have on student success. Evaluation of various assignments and assessments an educator gives to their students is a vital part in ensuring that they match the intended goal and yield results that serve to either inform the educator of student learning or of their own teaching effectiveness. Interpretation of results clearly also plays a key role in the skills of an assessment literate educator, as they must be able to be able to apply the information they receive from various forms of assessment in proper and effective ways to increase student success. An assessment literate educator has a handle on the process of selecting, evaluation, implementing, interpreting, and discussing assessments and assessment results, which is extremely critical to the process of student success and is a key link in the connection of educational stakeholders.

### **Assessment Literate Administrators:**

Although administrators aren't often directly involved with daily classroom instruction, they too are a vital part in the system of assessment literate individuals. Today's administrators have a different level of responsibility and concern. If they are to be effective, they should be involved in the happenings of the classroom, paying attention to how subgroups of students and students as a whole are showing growth. When stakes are high in relation to growth and improvement, it can be easy for administrators to lose sight of the goal of growth and to be swallowed up in the rhetoric of scores and quantifiable data. When administrators aren't assessment literate and their educators are, it proves to create a dangerous disconnect between teachers and administration. Administrators without assessment literacy aren't able to connect

with and work with their assessment literate educators in an effective and sustainable way, which causes a lack of shared knowledge and understanding between both parties. This can create problems as minor as miscommunication and as major as resentment directed towards administrators by educators. This also creates an imbalance of accountability and authority within the school building, further exacerbating these problems.

#### An Assessment Literate Administrator Believes...

- Effective assessment systems balance different purposes and methods.
- Feedback and communication between students, educators, and administrators is critical.
- A foundational knowledge of assessment and assessment practices is important.
- Teachers need time to engage in professional development and other supportive practices related to assessment literacy.
- Advocacy and proper decision making are vital components of a school's success.

Similar to educators, administrators need to understand that an effective assessment system must balance different purposes and must employ various appropriate assessment methods to measure different learning targets, as stated by the MAC. They also must have an understanding of and respect for the value that the resulting data has on the educational decisions made within their school buildings. They also understand that good classroom assessment and quality instruction are linked to each other, and they work to support the endeavors of the educators in their building who are employing their knowledge and skills to further student success (MAC). They also understand that, just like students, educators need effective feedback

to support their actions and to support student learning, and assessment literate administrators have the knowledge and ability to provide said feedback. This type of support and feedback can come through professional learning communities, targeted and differentiated professional development, walkthroughs of data collection and goal-setting practices, and clear education evaluation practices (MAC).

Technically speaking, administrators also need a foundational knowledge of different types of assessments and their uses, including summative assessment, interim benchmark assessment, formative assessment, and criterion vs. norm referenced assessment. They also have an understanding of reliability, validity, and correlation vs causation as they relate to assessment, which allows them better insight into how to interpret and act on assessment results to make appropriate instructional decisions for groups of students and schools (MAC).

One of the most important roles of an assessment literate administrator is to be able to understand the value of and to carve out time for implementation of opportunities for teachers to develop skills in various assessment related skills, including using formative assessments within daily classroom instruction, selecting, creating, and developing assessments, administering assessments, scoring and analyzing the results of assessments, developing instructional plans based on the results of assessments, and developing wider school improvement plans in conjunction with administrators based on assessment results (MAC).

Having assessment literate administrators is a critical component in promoting and sustaining a system of assessment literacy. If administration is not assessment literate, there are many missed opportunities to help teachers grow in their own work as assessment literate educators. It's important to remember that the process of building an assessment literate

community of stakeholders is a cyclical and recursive process, and it's vital that all involved are able to understand and capitalize on their role in the system of assessment literate education.

At the end of the day, assessment literate administrators know how to encourage their building and their colleagues to continue to strive to be assessment literate themselves, while promoting an environment that allows for such growth and excellence. They understand the importance of communication with all educational stakeholders, including their own staff, students, families, and the community at large, in order to continue to foster a productive and effective learning environment. They know how to collaborate with colleagues and with the community to create effective tools and resources, to promote a sense of positive community within and out of the school building itself, and to work on creating a common sense of understanding between all stakeholders, especially in regards to assessment practices. Finally, an assessment literate administrator understands the importance of their role and of their actions and decisions that are made throughout the school year, and they have an acute understanding of how important individual decisions are in the success of students.

### **Assessment Literate Policy Makers:**

Arguably, perhaps, the most critical components of an assessment literate education system are the policy makers and legislators that have a large amount of power when it comes to the way things are run and the way communities operate. Administrators, teachers, parents and families, and students can all be working toward or have accomplished the goal of being assessment literate, but if policy-makers are not assessment literate, we find ourselves in the same stalemate that many educators would say we've been in for decades - a war between

schools and policy makers who run them. Today's policy makers generally do not come from a background of being in the classroom, which makes their understanding of assessment and proper assessment practices minimal at most. This creates another dangerous disconnect between policy makers and their constituents, causing further tensions and stress on the educational sphere.

#### An Assessment Literate Policy-Maker Believes...

- A balanced assessment system has the potential to be successful and beneficial.
- Legislation has the power to either positively or negatively impact student learning and success in big ways.
- Communication and transparency with all stakeholders is necessary.
- A foundational and functional knowledge of assessment and assessment practices is critical in drafting proper legislation.

An assessment literate policy maker has key insight and understanding that can literally revolutionize in remarkably positive ways the way that school operations run. An assessment literate policy maker must know and fully believe that a balanced assessment system is possible and has the potential to be extremely beneficial, especially if it is understood that different users of assessments have different purposes for the assessment and that different assessment purposes require different methods of assessment (MAC). In short, assessment is not a one-size-fits-all solution and should not be tossed out as such. Assessment literate policy makers also must understand that the production of quality assessments is a multi-step process that takes time, and

that time is also required for users of said assessment to learn how to administer it and use the results appropriately. Consequently, resources may be necessary to do so (MAC).

Assessment literate policy makers understand the impact that their words, actions, and decisions have on the educational environment surrounding other stakeholders, their community, and their state, as well as the impact that legislation has on the creation, implementation, and results of the assessments themselves. Policy makers must understand that the legislation they create and act upon has the ability to either empower or disenfranchise students, teachers, and parents, and that proper and high quality assessment practices deliver results that empower all stakeholders and their respective communities. Similar to administrators and educators, policy makers have the responsibility of understanding the purpose of standardized tests and assessments, and they also have the responsibility of spreading that information to all of the different stakeholders they represent in order to continue to promote an environment of transparency with fellow policy makers and the community. This promotes efficient conversation about educational policy and standardized testing that allows for conversation about how to better improve the implementation, understanding, and promotion of standardized tests and associated practices based on feedback.

Assessment literate policy makers also have the task of creating a healthy environment that promotes learning and understanding, as well as healthy dialogue around the topic of education and assessment. They understand how to communicate information to their constituents regarding policy associated with assessment in order to learn what citizens want regarding assessment, and they understand the need to communicate the purpose and reasoning behind any related decisions. Policy makers must be able to unite their constituents under the

umbrella of educational policy success, and they need to create policy that benefits the greater good in a way that encourages all stakeholders to unite in support of all aspects of education, including assessment. Policy makers are essentially the glue that holds the education system together, and without an assessment literate policy maker, it's difficult for other aspects of the education system to succeed on their own.

### **Part Three: The Breakdown of Assessment**

#### **Summative Assessment (Assessment of Learning)**

As has already been discussed, a large part of being assessment literate is understanding the various types of assessment that exist in the educational realm, and most, if not all, fall under one of 2 categories – summative assessment and formative assessment. Summative assessment is perhaps the most widely understood recognized phrase in regard to assessment, even if it's likely that most people don't actually understand it's meaning or purpose. Summative assessment includes strategies that are designed to confirm what students know, demonstrate whether or not they have achieved curriculum outcomes, and to certify proficiency and make decisions about students' future programs or placements (Manitoba). Most Indiana natives would be most familiar with summative assessment as ISTEP, or its replacement, ILEARN, the state-wide standardized assessments that most students have taken or will take some time in their educational career. Summative assessments are therefore often the tests that determine school grades and future funding. However, the high stakes feelings that these assessments often promote can actually be alleviated by proper assessment techniques, which will be outlined momentarily. For now, understanding the idea of summative assessments is the first step.

In “Toward A Learning-Oriented Assessment to Improve Students’ Learning – A Critical Review of Literature”, Wenjie Zeng, Fuquan Huang, Lu Yu, and Siyu Chen write that “Summative assessment is used to judge students’ learning achievement, while formative assessment promotes their ongoing learning. Formative assessment is learning-oriented, and summative assessment may become learning oriented when it is designed with learning as well as judging” (213). Zeng et. al. touch on one of the key distinctions between summative assessment and its counterpart formative assessment, which will be further addressed later, by highlighting the fact that if summative assessment can be used for learning purposes when it is designed carefully to do so.

Teachers play an important role in the execution of assessment of learning, or summative assessment. An assessment literate educator must provide a number of things in order for the assessment to be beneficial and proper, including a rationale for understanding a particular assessment at a particular time, clear descriptions of the intended learning, processes that make it possible for students to demonstrate their competence and skill, a range of alternative mechanisms for assessing the same outcomes, public and defensible reference points for making judgements, transparent approaches to interpretation of results, descriptions of the assessment process, and strategies for recourse in the event of disagreement about the decisions (Manitoba). Because the results of summative assessment regularly become public, it’s important for educators to be able to effectively interpret and communicate results to all stakeholders about student learning.

In regard to differentiation of learning in summative assessment, it often occurs within the assessment itself at the request of necessary accommodations that allow the student to make

the particular learning visible. As always, results still need to be accurate and detailed enough to allow for wise recommendations about the student's next steps on their educational path (Manitoba). Evaluation of learning is often based on summative assessments, which are designed to provide evidence of student achievement at strategic times throughout the grade or the course (Ontario).

### **Formative Assessment (Assessment for Learning)**

Formative assessment is the counterpart of summative assessment, and it can be understood as both assessment for learning and assessment as learning. First, looking at formative assessment as a whole, it's important to understand that "the term formative assessment...is to be interpreted as encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Assessment and Classroom Learning, 8). Essentially, formative practices are key informants for the day to day educational decisions that are made by educators. Formative assessment, and specifically assessment for learning, occurs throughout the learning process and is designed to make each student's learning visible so that teachers can modify and differentiate teaching and learning activities to better help students progress (Manitoba). In assessment for learning, teachers use formative assessment as an investigative tool to find out as much as they can about the knowledge and abilities of their students, including the confusions, preconceptions, and gaps in knowledge they might have (Manitoba).

Cambridge Assessment promotes the idea that there are 5 key processes that take place in assessment for learning, or formative assessment. These steps include questioning that takes place between student and teacher, feedback between student and teacher, a students' understanding of what success looks like, the implementation of peer assessment and self assessment, and ultimately, a summative exam to show growth and improvement (Cambridge Assessment). They also specifically discuss the advantages of assessment for learning, which include, but are certainly not limited to, the improvement of learner outcomes, an increase in confidence and the promotion of self-efficacy, an increase in independence, and an overall change in the culture of the classroom (Cambridge Assessment). These things are active byproducts of formative assessment because formative assessment allows for a learning culture that is focused less on high-stakes and high-impact summative assessment and more on daily learning and growth.

In assessment for learning specifically, record keeping is a critical component of monitoring and discussing student growth, and it's important for educators to document individual student learning in relation to the continuum of learning and in relation to groups of students with similar learning patterns, which is especially useful for effective differentiation of instruction (Manitoba). While it is ultimately the teacher's job to keep the classroom focused on educational success, it is also critical in assessment for learning that both the student and the teacher share a common understanding of what constitutes success in the classroom and in learning in general, allowing for students to play a role in their own education that is often missing in summative assessment practices (Ontario). This is a perfect example of why we need to continue to talk about assessment literacy for students as well as other stakeholders, like

educators and policy makers. Formative assessment allows students the chance to ‘think like a teacher’ in a way that involves students becoming more active in their learning and gaining confidence in their involvement (Cambridge Assessment).

Other key components of successful formative assessment include feedback and differentiation of learning. While both feedback and differentiation of learning are critical for student success in all forms and facets of instruction and assessment, in specifically assessment for learning, feedback is a vital link between student and teacher. Feedback needs to be immediate and should identify the next steps for a student in a descriptive and specific manner (Manitoba). Without such communication, the formative practices that occur in the classroom fall short and don’t invite the student to take part in the process in much the same way as they would be able to otherwise. In regard to differentiation of learning, “when teachers are focused on assessment *for* learning, they are continually making comparisons between the curriculum expectations and the continuum of learning for individual students, and adjusting their instruction, grouping practices, and resources” (Manitoba, emphasis theirs).

While the main draw of formative practices is the fact that students begin to step up and play a larger role in the learning process, there are still guidelines for teachers that must be in place in order for formative practices to be beneficial in the long run. Teachers must align instruction with target outcomes, identify particular learning needs of student groups, select and adapt materials and resources, create differentiated teaching strategies and learning opportunities for helping individual students move forward in their learning, integrate assessment for learning practices into their lessons as a natural part of what they do, gauge how effectively they are using questioning, gauge how effectively their use of feedback is, monitor how much they use

self-assessment techniques in their practice, and ask themselves how they are helping their students learning effectively from summative assessments (Manitoba, Cambridge Assessment). It is also critical for teachers to use formative assessment practices in a way that integrates seamlessly with instruction, informs future instruction, guides next steps, and helps students monitor their progress toward achieving their personal and shared educational goals (Ontario).

### **Formative Assessment (Assessment as Learning)**

In partnership with assessment for learning, assessment as learning falls under the category of formative assessment practices for many of the same reasons that assessment for learning does. Zeng et. al. explains that “with the proposal and development of assessment of learning and assessment for learning, researchers have compared and contrasted summative assessment, formative assessment, assessment of learning, and assessment for learning, and have concluded that summative assessment aligns with the former and formative assessment aligns with the latter. And then, to help students take further responsibility for their own learning, some researchers advanced another method of assessment - assessment as learning”. In short, assessment as learning is a process of developing and supporting metacognition for students, and it focuses on the idea that learning is not just a matter of transferring ideas from someone who is knowledgeable to someone who is not, but is an active process of cognitive restructuring that happens as individuals interact with new ideas (Manitoba).

While engaging in the process of assessment as learning, the role of the teacher is to be a guide and example for students as they engage in the learning process. Teachers must monitor and teach the skills of self-assessment, guide students in setting goals and monitoring their own

progress, provide exemplars of good practice and quality work that reflect curriculum outcomes, work with students to develop clear criteria of good practice, guide students in developing internal feedback or self-monitoring mechanisms, provide regular and challenging opportunities to practice, monitor students' metacognitive processes and their learning, provide descriptive feedback, and create an environment where students feel safe enough and supported enough to take chances with their learning (Manitoba). Assessment as learning “focuses on the role of the student as the critical connector between assessment and learning”, which is a revolutionary shift in the traditional understanding of the student and teacher relationship and the student and education system relationship (Toward A Learning-Oriented Assessment to Improve Students' Learning, 213).

Communication of results and concerns in assessment as learning is the responsibility of students, who must learn, through the help of educators, to articulate and defend the nature and quality of their own learning (Manitoba). Similarly, feedback is a critical component in assessment as learning as well, because learning is enhanced when students can see the effects of what they have tried, and can envision alternative strategies to better understand materials or content (Manitoba). Differentiation of learning is very student-centered, as well, but educators also have a role of fostering discussions about what students are learning, what it means to do well, what the alternatives might be for each student to advance their learning, what personal goals have been reached, and what more challenging goals can be set (Manitoba). Assessment as learning, as a subset of formative assessment, is perhaps most unlike the 'traditional' format of assessment, which is part of what makes it so appealing to those who are looking for a new way to interact with assessment and the learning process.

## **Part 4: Implications and Conclusion**

With a better understanding of the history of assessment and a more analytic explanation of tenets of quality assessment practices, it should be clear to see that there is a disconnect in instruction and assessment practices in this nation, and it's having a negative effect on student success. Put simply, "We are a nation obsessed with the belief that the path to school improvement is paved with better, more frequent, and more intense standardized testing. The problem is that such tests, ostensibly developed to 'leave no student behind', are in fact causing major segments of our student population to be left behind" (Assessment Crisis, 2). This backwards understanding of assessment and assessment practices can only be changed through a broader reach of assessment literacy, which has the capability of transforming the narrative that students, schools, and communities have around testing practices. This transformative understanding has the ability to shift the way that testing and, more importantly, learning is conceived of and implemented for the good of society, but without a widespread level of assessment literacy, that possibility is far from recognizable. As Richard Stiggins states, "What is missing in assessment practice in this country is the recognition that, to be valuable for instructional planning, assessment needs to be a moving picture - a video stream rather than a periodic snapshot. If assessment is used to inform effective instruction, then that assessment is quickly rendered out of date. Student learning will have progressed and will need to be assessed again so that instruction can be planned to extend the students' new growth" (Formative Assessment, 141).

The implications of assessment literacy and related practices on student success is profound and tantalizing. “...any assessment changes...might be expected to enhance learning if they help students to develop reflective habits of mind...such developments should be an essential component in programs for the implementation of authentic assessment in classroom practice. Assessment is to be seen as a moment of learning, and students have to be active in their own assessment to picture their own learning in light of an understanding of what it means to get better” (Assessment and Classroom Learning, 29-30). Shifting the dynamic within the classroom in this way allows for a transformative reset on the way that learning and understanding are perceived and played out between student and teacher, and this sort of change is extremely beneficial not only for the impact that assessment will have on students and their psyche, but also for their ability to engage with education and the world as learners. What’s important to remember is that “it is the pupils who will take the next steps and the more they are involved in the process the greater will be their understanding of how to extend their learning. Thus, action that is most likely to raise standards will follow when pupils are involved in decisions about their work rather than being passive recipients of teachers’ judgements of it” (Assessment for Learning, 8). We have the potential to set students up for a lifetime of being productive learners.

The most challenging part of these realizations, perhaps, is the understanding that assessment literacy and transforming the assessment environment doesn’t happen overnight, and may not happen very easily. In fact, what might be the biggest hurdle for nay-sayers of assessment literacy and formative assessment practices to get over is the fact that “it is not possible to introduce formative assessment without some radical change in classroom pedagogy

because, of its nature, it is an essential component of pedagogic process” (Assessment and Classroom Learning, 10). What we’re urging for is deep, foundational change that requires time, work, and patience, which are hard things to find in the world of policy and education. However, there are steps that can be taken even now, in the form of discussions about these ideas all the way to large-scale changes in pedagogy that “calls for rather deep changes both in teachers’ perceptions of their own role in relation to their students and in their classroom practice” (Assessment and Classroom Learning, 20).

One of the most pressing issues in this discussion about new practices and pedagogy is the fact that one of the most critical points of interaction with students and with the assessment process is educators, educators who can be described as “a national faculty unschooled in the principles of sound assessment” (Formative Assessment, 141). As a pre-service teacher myself, I can fully understand and sympathize with the complaints and concerns of today’s educators as they grapple with the current assessment environment, but I can also testify to the underwhelming amount of assessment literacy and introduction to formative assessment practices present in my pre-service education. Put simply, “If formative assessment is to be an integral part of professional practice, there needs to be a major investment made in teachers. This investment must begin with changes in preservice training. No teacher should exit a professional training program without the knowledge to assess student learning. Furthermore, beginning teachers must have opportunities to develop and practice the skills of assessing before they are responsible for a class of students” (Formative Assessment, 145).

I strongly believe that the first step in totally transforming the conversation around assessment in this country is by starting first with the teachers that daily interact with students

and with assessments of all kinds. Although it is also true that a lot of the day to day activities of the classroom are structured around strict standards and curricula that often comes from sources outside of educators' control, there is something to be said about the importance of the presence of the knowledge of assessment literacy and related practices. Most educators aren't learning to teach with formative practices in mind, and those who do are often ultimately pressured by high-stakes accountability, and "The price that we must pay to achieve such benefits is an investment in teachers and their classroom assessment practices. We must initiate a program of professional development specifically designed to give teachers the expertise they need to assess for learning" (Assessment Crisis, 9). Devoting more resources to professional development and teacher training is absolutely necessary to begin to transform the educational system, and specifically assessment practices, and this investment is one that needs to be supported by administrators and policy makers alike. As much work as educators put into this reform, "Federal education officials, state policy makers, and local school leaders must allocate resources in equal proportions to ensure the accuracy and effective use of assessments both of and for learning" (Assessment Crisis, 9). We can begin to promote assessment literacy and related practices in an environment that facilitates these changes, which comes from the support and understanding of all stakeholders, students, families, teachers, administrators, and policy makers. Promoting assessment literacy is a critical task, and one that will inevitably transform the educational landscape and the world we live in for good.

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