

Reflection on:

Classroom Assessment Practices of Early-Career Ontario Secondary School Teachers

This qualitative research study allowed me to learn the process of qualitative research, and to learn a great deal about leadership and change in the context of classroom assessment. By interviewing seven young secondary school teachers, I learned the value of open-ended inquiry, that can then be quantified and analyzed, and can result in unique and original insights.

One of the challenges faced by secondary teachers is education policy that provides conflicting direction that is not easily reconciled in the classroom. For example, teachers are directed to gather assessment data in the form of products, conversations and observations, and to record these as levels or marks within the four achievement categories of Knowledge, Thinking & Inquiry, Communication, and Application. This data is to be gathered, classified as Formative or Summative, and then utilized both to improve instruction and to report to students and parents. It is in the reporting stage that the conflict arises. Teachers must take very rich data, and distill it down to a percentage grade. Since the final product is a mark, it is understandably tempting to merely records as marks from the very beginning, and to omit any observations and conversations, and any other assessment data that doesn't easily translate to a percentage grade. Since this shortcut is available, the richness of the formative process and the value of the categorization of learning is lost.

The research for this paper served two purposes:

1. I was able to examine teacher practice, and explore how teachers navigate the assessment and reporting process, with its contradictions.

2. I was able to personally experience how much richer the data is when it is gathered as a conversation, rather than via a product such as a survey of teachers, or records of student achievement data.

It was interesting to learn how varied the practices were between teachers, and how their pre-service training differed from institution to institution. I was also given insight into how important the role of the school leader is, in supporting risk-taking, innovation, and change. The impact of the teacher leadership is also great; it is very challenging for a novice teacher to implement practices that do not align with the teachers with whom they share a course or discipline. This social nature of change is a common thread in business literature, where the business solution is to reorganize and to hire and fire to, as Jim Collins advised in "Good to Great", "get the right people on the bus" (2001). In Ontario, with Regulation 274, this is not a possible option for school leaders, and so change must be approached with different strategies.

The process of interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing was both interesting, and at the same time tedious. I chose to exceed the required three interviewees (as required for the course), and instead interviewed all seven of the long-term-occasional teachers on my staff. While this then turned the task of transcription into a week-long endeavor, it also allowed me to triangulate responses within the interview, and apply some of the concepts I had learned in my previous survey course, to see where data was validated as it aligned from one interview to the next. What had seemed to me to be initially a completely qualitative study, took on some aspects of a quantitative study, as I was able to quantify responses as "all", "some" or "none".

The literature review revealed to me that there has been little research that directly examines classroom assessment practices in Ontario. Despite its eight years of implementation, there is only one reference to "Growing Success" found when a search is conducted of the

University of Toronto Library system (Through the Looking Glass: Interpreting Growing Success, The Kindergarten Addendum, Ontario's Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting Policy Document, Kelly-Ann MacAlpine, 2017), and it is an examination of the Kindergarten program.

This gap, therefore, has provided me with great scope for future research.

It has been gratifying to see some of the conclusions of this study echoed in the current report "Ontario: A Learning Province", which has been released this month. The work of Dr. Carol Campbell, Dr. Jean Clinton, Dr. Michael Fullan, Dr. Andy Hargreaves, Dr. Carl James and Kahontakwas Diane Longboat is also primarily a qualitative study, with scales used for some questions, and then analysis provided in the form of percentages of respondents who responded "Very Well" and "Well" and those who responded "Poorly" and "Very Poorly" to questions of effectiveness of classroom assessments and EQAO assessments. Many of its recommendations relating to classroom assessments are connected directly to concerns raised by my study's respondents, and I'm sure that their reading of the report will resonate with them.