

May 11, 2007

Everyone knows Monica Pamer, one of BC's outstanding educators. Monica has been seconded to the Ministry for the past three years from her role as Assistant Superintendent with the Richmond School District. This July she returns to that role and leaves her work on student achievement and literacy in the Ministry. I asked Monica to write an article discussing assessment and its uses that would be appropriate for principals to use in parent communications. Monica put this piece together, and I recommend it to you. It gives a simple and clear description of the types of assessment and the uses of assessment.

Assessment – More than just testing

Assessment. When they hear that word, most people think of two things we all dread- tests and taxes. Yet as educators, we know that there are many kinds of assessments used for different reasons at different times. A test is just one method, but there are many other ways to find out what students are learning. So many other ways, in fact, that it gets confusing. We refer to summative and formative assessment, not to mention assessment, "for", "as" and "of" learning, to name just a few.

While there is much debate about which of these terms to use or not use, for now I'll focus on summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment is the one that is most familiar to all of us. This is because it means assessing what students have learned at the end of a unit or term to see if they have met curriculum outcomes or the goals of an individual education program. The tool can be a test, project, presentation or anything else that meets this goal.

Summative assessment has traditionally made up the bulk of our ideas about how learning is evaluated and

certified. However it's important to take a minute to think about what this says about teaching and learning, at least on the surface. The teacher teaches, tests student knowledge about what was taught, makes a judgement about what was learned and moves to the next unit (WNCP, 2005).

Nothing wrong with that as far as it goes, but in the past 20 years brain research has told us that people have very different ways of learning, and a lot of that has to do with connecting new information with what they already know. And what kids already know varies as much as they do.

That's where formative assessment comes in. It's a tool to support learning as it happens rather than a way of judging what has been learned after the fact. Formative assessment helps kids learn and teachers teach because it gives both of them immediate feedback about what is understood along with what is still unclear. Teachers can teach in a way that gets at gaps or just plain mistakes in students' understandings, and students have a clearer idea of what they still need to learn. Like summative assessment, formative assessment includes tools such as quizzes, observations, learning logs, presentations etc. The big difference between summative and formative assessment is what the information is used for.

Formative assessment is used to learn more about what is being learned while it's happening. Summative is used to find out and evaluate what has been learned when the process is complete.

But here's the most important part – there is overwhelming evidence that kids do better on summative assessment tasks when they've been supported along the way through formative assessment to promote their learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). We need both kinds of assessment, not one or the other, to give our kids the best chance to achieve in the classroom.

Susan Close, Assistant Superintendent, School District No. 40 (New Westminster), sent me this story about a school in Nanaimo that is making great strides. Listen to what Donna Anderson and Tammy Reynolds, Lead Literacy Teachers at Coal Tyee Elementary School, have to say about their work providing for the success of students. I found the paragraph outlining the shared “common basic beliefs” among the educators in this school particularly compelling. Also, listen to the fun and enthusiasm in this powerful story.

“A Recipe for Success”

How Shared Leadership Developed into Professional Learning Groups

Combine the latest research on reading comprehension and a “vision” of “shared leadership” with a staff of life-long learners, and you have a recipe for success. However, as every cook knows, too much of one ingredient, or not enough of another, can also be a recipe for disaster. In January/February of 2007 it became obvious that the ingredients had been mixed perfectly. The staff at Coal Tyee School had begun by coming together, made progress by keeping together and were finally succeeding by working together. It was no longer a leadership model with “experts” at the top, but one where a staff comes together as equals, sharing experiences and expertise.

As lead literacy teachers, we are so excited about what has happened in our school and we honestly do “run” down hallways and interrupt each other’s classes, just to share what our students are doing. We really didn’t understand how much our students were capable of or how little we had to change our teaching to make such a significant difference in their thinking. Just as importantly, we didn’t realize how much our excitement, commitment and hard work would impact those around us. If we believe in ourselves as learners and trust the professionals with whom we work, amazing things can happen!

It began with a belief in SmartLearning and SmartReading. It really didn’t take long to realize the

difference SMART makes for all students...the results are powerful and immediate. It simply makes good teaching/learning sense: combine current research about reading comprehension with a proven framework and you are on your way. Like all “new” learning, the first few steps were taken with a great deal of caution. We knew it was going to take a lot more than believing something was worthwhile to make significant change in our school. But, we also knew there were three important ingredients already in the mixing bowl:

- Our district had instituted a “shared leadership” component to district literacy. Schools are given a .2 lead literacy position that is in place for 3 years. At Coal Tyee we have been sharing the position for the past 2 years (.1 each).
- The SD No. 68 Literacy Resource Teacher recognized our school’s “potential” and supported us (money, time, training).
- Coal Tyee has a supportive staff of learners and an administrator who provided release time in classrooms and purchased resources.

We also had some common basic beliefs (based on research) about learning and change:

- School-wide change and teacher knowledge and expertise make the most significant difference.
- There is a need to “**Raise the Bar**” for student learning and to “**close the gap**” to ensure **ALL** of our students have the opportunity for a future of their choosing.
- Research repeatedly shows that good instruction is a key factor in improving student learning.
- **Success leads to success through shared leadership.** As teachers take risks using powerful instruction and see results with their students, they are inspired to share their expertise and become leaders.
- There is a need for literacy assessment of all students in order to design purposeful and appropriate instruction.

After two and half years of hard work, persistence and a belief that we could improve reading and writing for all students, something special happened. In the fall

of 2006, after our “for learning” district assessment, teachers met in grade groups to analyze results. They agreed that the teaching of “inference” was an obvious need, K-7. As lead literacy teachers we agreed to become inference “experts” and share our expertise; staff members agreed to develop sequences (inference focus) for their classes (or grade group for those who wanted to work together) by Christmas break. We had to do a lot of research to fully understand (at least what we thought was fully understanding) inference and be ready for a January in-service

Our first meeting in January was quiet, almost “uncomfortable”. After the first couple of days the conversations started and WOW! Staff members realized they needed more support and more information...we realized we weren’t the “experts” we thought we were and all the questions and conversations sent us back to the books (professional resources like: “Mosaic of Thought”, “Strategies That Work”, “Reading Power”, “Comprehension Toolkit”, “Reading with Meaning”, “Non-Fiction Matters”, etc.) several times. This was exactly what we needed...we now knew staff members were thinking deeply about what they were teaching. We all felt like students...well, at least beginning teachers. More than once we had to “rescue” teachers in hallways as they fumbled their way trying to teach something they realized they didn’t fully understand. The more questions they asked, the more deeply we all had to think. Lunch hour conversations were buzzing with what worked and didn’t work, copying “language” from each other and running into our classrooms in the afternoon, hoping we finally had answers. These conversations were so valuable they led to meetings based on need...“Help me now!!!” or “Let me show you what we’ve just done!!!” These soon developed into a regular Monday book club; a professional learning community was developing. At the end of the six weeks teachers did not stop; many classrooms have now worked their way through several books (picture books, novels, non fiction texts) that helped them teach inference. The professional sharing that is happening in our hallways, at lunch, before school, after school, using email and in our classrooms has left us speechless! Our recipe is working!

We feel the teaching of inference has “turned the tide” at Coal Tyee. Why? Staff members have definitely made a difference for their students by being learners themselves and therefore improving instruction. But, we have also made a difference in our professional community through shared leadership and professional learning groups. For us, the icing on the cake was when we were no longer “leading” our professional learning group ...teachers were bringing their students’ work to show what they had accomplished and other teachers, including us, were listening and asking questions about their instructional strategies. We were now all learning from each other. Our “shared leadership” model had now gone from two “experts” at the top to one of a community of experts learning from each other. Success does lead to success! When teachers take risks using powerful instruction and see results with their students, they are inspired to share their expertise and become leaders.

Teachers are having so much fun with their lessons and are constantly amazed at what students are capable of. It will still be a long time before everyone is willing and able to consistently be SMART but it is slowly happening with each teacher moving at his/her own speed...speed of comfort.

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The beginning of this week saw much talk in the media about the Foundation Skills Assessment. It amazes me that this little assessment can draw so much interest, particularly when the participation rate last year was about 90%. Did you know that when the FSA policy framework was originally designed, the BCTF members of the ministry’s Assessment Review Committee advocated for policies to maximize student participation? This included a requirement that the Principal report the names of all students excused to the Superintendent and the very narrow guidelines for exclusion. The policy framework was developed during Dr. Ungerleider’s term as Deputy Minister. How things change! It is unfortunate that these assessments have become political campaigns. The energy needs to be focussed on student success.