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Introduction

The rapidly changing requirements associated with assessment and evaluation are making an impact on all teachers, but the effects of these requirements on high school and elementary school teachers are at least being addressed. Middle school teachers, on the other hand, are apt to feel left out—their special needs ignored and their special problems unsolved.

The middle school itself is not that easy to define. Across the country, you can find various clusters of grade levels grouped together and called middle schools or junior high schools. There can be schools that are made up of grades 6 through 8, 7 and 8, 6 through 9, and 7 through 9. There are also others that must be included, such as the 7 through 12 school that puts the middle school and high school together.

Within these groupings you will find an assortment of instructional patterns: self-contained classrooms in which one teacher is responsible for teaching all the subjects at a grade level, semi-departmentalized structures in which teachers teach their own strengths and specialties but are still responsible for a “homeroom” group, and totally departmentalized schools that operate like high schools.

The newest middle school instructional pattern is the interdisciplinary team. This team often consists of four teachers (usually in the areas of English, social studies, science, and math, although many other combinations are possible) who share a group of students and a block of time. They are usually involved in planning together and then teaching an interdisciplinary unit (IDU). They require a great amount of flexibility within the school’s schedule and, thus, depend for their existence on strong administrative support. If several teams are in operation, they may be involved in the new concept of creating pseudo-families which are called villages, homes, or communities. They provide smaller, more student-friendly groups within the larger school.

Happily, no matter which combination of these variables a middle school teacher may face, the use of portfolios and other alternative assessments need not constitute another problem. Rather, these new assessments can offer some convenient answers to commonly asked questions such as these:

- How can I pull everything together for purposes of grading and conferencing?
- How can I accumulate evidence to back up my subjective observations of cooperative groups? Of projects in the area of social studies? Of investigations in science and math?
- How can I involve my students and give them ownership of their learning process?
- How can I find the time to do all of this? I’m trying to teach!

This book is designed to provide some answers to these and many other questions.

An Assessment Overview

Assessment is...

Assessment is simply the systematic and purposeful method of looking at where you are and where you should be going. Ideally, any form of academic assessment will both inform students of their progress and help teachers identify what those students still need to learn. Assessment also provides information to the various publics served by the schools: parents, administrators, school boards, and taxpayers. Additionally, in the middle school, assessment gives teachers the information they need about students to plan and develop curriculum as well as to assign grades.

Traditional Assessment is...

Traditional assessment is associated with paper-and-pencil tests and usually focuses on incremental skills that can be graded objectively. These tests are often multiple-choice and standardized, and are sometimes mandated by the district or the state. They have the advantages of being easily administered and easily graded. However, their interpretation is not always easy, and the same results are often used to support opposing educational and/or political agendas.

The use of traditional objective tests, unfortunately, has become entrenched in the middle schools because these tests generally are associated with minimum proficiency tests given before a student goes on to high school. They have also become associated with negative misapprehensions about the middle school age group. In contrast, people who see this age group from a positive vantage point, see the students as free, curious, and eager to learn—ready, in fact, for the new kinds of assessment.

Alternative Assessment is...

Alternative assessment is sometimes referred to as the “new” assessment. Methods of alternative assessment are usually based on student performance and can be in the form of assigned tasks or can take place over a period of “real” time.

The assigned-task type of performance assessment may take the form of investigations, problem-solving situations, or assignments that combine reading and writing. Here, students can be asked to write to a prompt and are assessed on the basis of a familiar rubric. Or they can be given prescribed tasks that are then monitored by an observer (the teacher) with a checklist based on an appropriate task analysis.

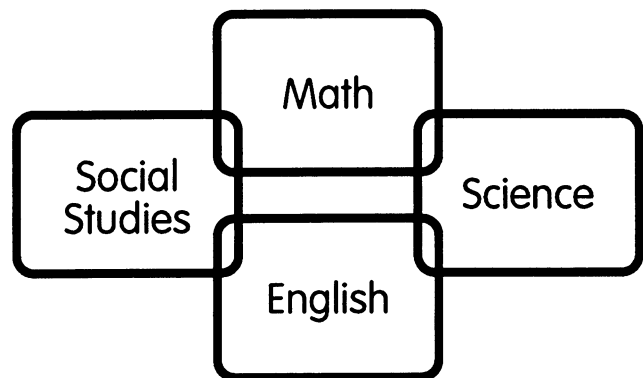
An Assessment Overview (cont.)

The student performance to be judged over a period of real time may take the form of samples collected in—surprise!—a portfolio. If a district or school lacks commitment or interest, it is still good instructional practice for the students to use portfolios. If the term frightens people (your teaching partners, for example, or even you), you can call them “files.” Portfolios, or files, in any subject area provide examples of work that serve as an authentic assessment of performance over a period of time as long as they are not produced under artificial testing conditions. (More information about this is found in the section entitled Authentic Assessment.) The examples should represent the ongoing work of the student for the year or for a part of the year.

Whether the performance is staged or occurs in real time, the tasks associated with alternative assessment will share some important, identifying characteristics: they will involve a group of learning behaviors; they will permit more than one solution; and they will result in a single product. In other words, to use the current educational catch-phrases, they will be complex, open-ended, and coherent.

In addition to assigned-task and real-time performance assessment, a third and less formal kind of performance assessment uses the teaching material itself to assess what has been taught. This kind of assessment, sometimes called Real-Life Assessment, recommends that teachers match their assessment tools to their teaching strategy. For example, if you want to assess comprehension, ask the student to retell or summarize what he or she just read. If you want to know if a student can predict, ask the student what will probably happen next and why.

Alternative methods of assessment are particularly appropriate for use when interdisciplinary teaching is going on. Interdisciplinary teaching, as the name implies, crosses the curriculum, providing flexible and adequate increments of time. It allows teachers to adapt to various learning styles, experiment with cooperative groups, and encourages the use of high level thinking skills.



This, of course, is exactly the kind of teaching that is going on in the new middle school instructional pattern known as the interdisciplinary team and described in the Introduction. And this is just one more reason that alternative assessment is so appropriate in the middle school. The assessment and evaluation of learning that should take place in this kind of environment is much too complex for the use of multiple-choice tests and letter grades alone. Moreover, working from the results of alternative assessment back to the letter grades that your district may expect is easy. At the same time, you will also have evidence to back up all your grading decisions in case of questions from students, parents, and/or administrators.