

ESSENTIAL ASSESSMENT

*Six Tenets for Bringing Hope,
Efficacy, and Achievement
to the Classroom*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Authors *xi*

Introduction **1**

A Brief Inventory 2

Past Practice 2

Mixed Messages 3

New Aims 4

Assessment at the Center 5

The Framework 6

About This Book 7

It's Personal 8

1 | *Hope, Efficacy, and Achievement* **11**

A New Direction 14

Measuring What Matters Most 15

Measuring in Ways Conducive to Learning 16

Research Synthesis 16

Hope 17

Efficacy 18

Achievement 20

Hope, Efficacy, and Achievement in the Classroom 20

Building Relationships 21

Using Assessment Processes to Build Relationships 22

Creating the Culture 23

Pause and Ponder 26

2 | ***Assessment Purpose*** **27**

- Understanding the First Tenet: Assessment Purpose 29
 - The Evolution of the Modern Assessment Paradigm 30
 - The Formative Purpose 31
 - The Summative Purpose 32
- Research Synthesis** **33**
 - Formative Assessment 34
 - Summative Assessment 35
- Assessment Purpose in the Classroom** **36**
 - It’s About Use, Not Labels 36
 - Formative Targets, Summative Standards 36
 - Formative Imbalance 37
- Pause and Ponder** **39**

3 | ***Communication of Results*** **41**

- Understanding the Second Tenet: Communication of Results . . . 43
 - Formative Feedback 44
 - Summative Feedback 45
- Research Synthesis** **46**
 - The Power of Feedback 46
 - Motive, Opportunity, and Means 48
 - Personal Triggers Instead of Generic Impact 49
 - The More We Know, the Less We Know 49
 - Grading and Reporting 50
- Communication of Results in the Classroom** **51**
 - Formative Feedback 51
 - Summative Feedback (Grading) 53
- Pause and Ponder** **58**

4 | ***Accurate Interpretation*** **59**

- Understanding the Third Tenet: Accurate Interpretation . . . 61
- Research Synthesis** **63**
 - Accuracy and Validity 63
 - Accuracy and Reliability 65

Accurate Interpretation in the Classroom69

 Establish Clear Criteria and Identify Evidence to Monitor Proficiency and Progress.69

 Use Classroom Observations to Maintain Deliberate Focus and Monitor Student Responses.69

 Collaborate During the Development Phase70

 Collaborate During the Appraisal Phase70

Pause and Ponder.75

5

Assessment Architecture77

Understanding the Fourth Tenet: Assessment Architecture .79

Research Synthesis81

 Planned Assessment82

 Purposeful Assessment83

Assessment Architecture in the Classroom83

 Understanding Standards.84

 Isolating Learning Progressions85

 Outlining Levels of Complexity.85

 Articulating Learning Intentions: Targets and Success Criteria . .87

 Choosing the Best Assessment Method.88

 Designing Measurement Tools91

Pause and Ponder.94

6

Instructional Agility95

Understanding the Fifth Tenet: Instructional Agility97

Research Synthesis98

 Asking Quality Questions.99

 Employing Reciprocal Questions.101

 Engaging in Class Dialogue101

 Analyzing Responses102

 Generating Sufficient Sample Sizes of Quality Evidence . . .103

Instructional Agility in the Classroom104

 Preplanning Questions.105

 Generating Engaging Conversations.105

 Analyzing Errors108

 Promoting Continued Thinking108

Pause and Ponder.110

7 | *Student Investment* 111

Understanding the Sixth Tenet: Student Investment	113
Research Synthesis	114
Promoting Self-Regulation and Assessment	115
Getting to Know Learners	118
Promoting a Growth Mindset	118
Student Investment in the Classroom	120
The Forethought, Planning, and Activation Phase	123
The Monitoring Phase	125
The Control Phase	127
The Reaction and Reflection Phase	128
Pause and Ponder	130

Epilogue 131

Risk Taking	133
Productive Failure	133
Celebrated Successes	134
Leadership When Assessment Is at the Center	136
Read and Learn	137
Co-construct a Vision for Assessment With Teachers	137
Pilot Practices and Reflect on Impact	138
Ask Students	138
Provide Resources and Focus	138
A New Emphasis for Assessment	138

References & Resources 141

Index 153

INTRODUCTION

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.

—Desmond Tutu

Since the mid-1990s, no topic has dominated the educational landscape more than assessment. While we know much about how sound assessment practices contribute to achievement and student motivation, the gap between knowing and doing remains a vital point of interest as we build our capacity to put theory into practice.

Exploration in the field of assessment is long-standing and sometimes peppered with contradictions. Whether we go back to 1845 when schools began testing their students in uniform ways, or we traverse to 1969 to Benjamin Bloom's claims that the effective use of formative evaluation is maximized when it is separated from the grading process, or we jettison to 2013 when a published anthology of international research (McMillan, 2013) highlighted the need for better classroom assessments, we can see that much thought and conversation have gone into the literature over time. We can also see that a gap still exists between what we know from the research and what we do in schools.

Clearly, the work around classroom assessment is not new. Events and evolving research continually change the dialogue over time. The advent of the standards movement in the late 1980s and into the 1990s launched a subsequent focus on students achieving proficiency (instead of simply accumulating points) through the demonstration of specific criteria. The evolving research on formative assessment (since the mid-1990s) shifted the focus from simply proving learning with documentation to improving learning with quality assessment processes. Predictably, changing times bring new concerns, such as the instructional complexities of helping all students achieve at high levels and the public backlash against the frequency and intensity of external, high-stakes testing. Once again, we are at a pivotal moment that requires us to take inventory to reaffirm, rework, and rethink our assessment fundamentals.

A Brief Inventory

There is no shortage of research indicating the most favorable assessment practices. The studies are plentiful, rich, and comprehensive. However, as we examine the assessment landscape, there are many distinct reasons we should take inventory of what we know and pivot toward *what's next* in our collective investigation of how assessment can drive achievement. First, despite the depth of research, there are conflicting voices and messages that make it challenging for educators to pinpoint the most effective assessment practices (Heritage, 2016). Second, the emergence of cross-curricular competencies (also known as 21st century skills) as an educational priority alters the direction and purpose behind classroom assessment work. Third, the complexities of ensuring all learners achieve at high levels recertify assessment fluency and capacity as essential for all educators. And finally, and maybe most important, today's learners are truly losing hope in the system. Absentee rates, dropout rates, and the disappointing discovery that only about half the students polled in a 2015 Gallup survey identify themselves as “hopeful” and “engaged” all highlight the loss of relevance and optimism that students feel toward school (Abdul-Alim, 2016). It is clearly time to rethink our assessment practices and beliefs.

Past Practice

There are past (and sometimes newer) assessment processes that disengage learners and discourage learning. When educators employ assessments from curricular resources without careful attention to the standards, they can generate inaccurate or unhelpful information often used to make decisions about learners. When assessments are simply scored and recorded, they fail to give learners helpful insight into where they go next on their journey. When extraneous factors (like using zeros and taking points off) are put in the gradebook to inspire learners to improve, educators create insurmountable hurdles that guarantee mastery will be unattainable. In many cases, learning has been less about proficiency and more about earning points.

Researchers agree that such practices kill hope, undermine efficacy, and block deep learning. John Hattie (2009) references the research of Zoltán Dörnyei (2001) in a quote:

Motivation is highest when students are competent, have sufficient autonomy, set worthwhile goals, get feedback, and are affirmed by others. . . . Student demotivation [is] caused by . . . public humiliation, devastating test results, or conflicts with teachers or peers. For many, demotivation has more impact than motivation. Such demotivation can directly affect commitment to the goals of learning, turn off the wish for and power of

feedback, and decrease involvement. It can take less effort by a teacher to demotivate students compared to the often greater effort required to motivate them—to turn students onto learning. (Hattie, 2009, p. 48)

Many of the more traditional assessment practices are falling short of building hope, efficacy, and achievement for the majority of learners in today's K–12 classrooms.

Mixed Messages

Most experts agree on the fundamental principles that guide sound classroom assessment practices. The mixed messages surface within classroom practice. Conflicting messages create a level of frustration for educators trying to do the right thing with their assessment practices.

One place where these mixed messages have emerged is with formative assessment. Most experts agree that, in general, *formative assessment* is assessment used to guide (not judge) learning; however, a closer examination of the professional literature reveals some disagreement with the granular details (such as whether to grade formative assessments, specifics on quality feedback, and so on). While some claim that scores interfere with the formative nature of assessment, others believe that without a score, students will not know where they are along the learning continuum. As well, some position formative assessment as having a smaller, more granular focus, while others believe formative assessment is akin to summative assessments that “don't count.” Though classroom feedback is considered a formative practice, it also has its own supporting research. *Effective feedback practices* have also emerged as an area full of mixed messages. Recommendations about how much feedback to provide, what form that feedback should take, its timing, and the subsequent actions by both teachers and students still remain incongruent. While there is agreement on feedback fundamentals, the research is most often sourced from isolated measures (a one-time event) utilizing artificial tasks (activities unrelated to the typical school experience) with little acknowledgment or control of the significant impact both the classroom context and the student-teacher relationship have on learning.

Yet another area of assessment-related mixed messages involves the role, design, and use of *summative assessment*. While some question the value of summative assessment altogether, others call for a thoughtful, seamless relationship between formative assessment and summative assessment. Within the summative paradigm is an ongoing, rich debate between traditional grading and standards-based grading. At the systems level, the accelerated onset of standardized testing, its value to the system, its function in advancing achievement, and its role in measuring teacher quality result in a wide variety of perspectives, positions, policies, and practices.

Formative assessment, effective feedback practices, and summative assessment are three areas where mixed messages have emerged, but to be sure, they are not the only three. Clearly, there is a level of disagreement that needs to be reconciled for the practitioners and learners. These mixed messages about a core educational process make it essential for us to take inventory of where we are with our assessment practices, determine where we *need* to be to maximize the achievement of our learners, and identify the most efficient and effective pathway there.

New Aims

Another force driving the need to take inventory of assessment practices is the emergence of cross-curricular competencies as additional important outcomes for our learners. Also referred to as *21st century skills*, these competencies (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, to name a few) are now considered essential for learners to be ready for college and careers in a global economy (National Education Association, n.d.). While there is little disagreement about students' need for and educators' general excitement about the potential contribution these competencies can make to the classroom experience, the conversations about *assessing* these competencies leave us with more questions than answers.

Most of the cross-curricular competencies schools and districts are emphasizing are not *new* but have become *ends* rather than *means*. In the past, for example, we used critical thinking as a means to access certain curricular standards. Historically, critical thinking was not taught or assessed, but the process of thinking critically was used as a conduit to achieving certain standards. However, critical thinking has (along with the many other competencies) been repositioned as an *end*. Critical thinking is now identified as a necessary skill and a parallel learning outcome to teach and assess, and while the assessment of critical thinking may happen through nontraditional methods, we can still track and report our learners' growth as critical thinkers just like any other skill.

The assessment of cross-curricular competencies requires a level of sophistication unlike traditional practice. It is daunting and requires meaningful guidance with purposeful attention to the most relevant assessment practices and metrics.

Not everything in the classroom needs to be assessed, but if schools and districts are going to publicly claim cross-curricular competencies as additional outcomes for learners, there is an obligation to assess them so the reporting of success and growth has credibility; without assessment, the claim of development remains a hollow, self-indulgent platitude. The assessment of cross-curricular competencies is both simple and complex. It's *simple* because sound assessment principles apply seamlessly to this new process; it's *complex* because our collective fluency and capacity with sound assessment principles are not where they need to be to reliably assess these competencies.

Assessment at the Center

Classroom assessment is central to every teacher's success and every learner's success. It is central to addressing the standards. It is central to guiding instruction. It is central to making individual and program improvements. It is more than just a measure of learning; it must *promote* learning. We hold the vision that assessment practices must build hope, efficacy, and achievement for learners and teachers.

As a way of encapsulating the essential assessment practices necessary to maximize the success of all learners and assisting with both taking inventory and reinvigorating the focus on assessment, we offer the six assessment tenets (figure I.1) as a framework.

- 1 Assessment purpose:** Understanding assessment purpose means there is a clear picture of how to use the emerging assessment results before the assessment. The formative purpose of assessment is about continual learning; the summative purpose is about the verification of learning. Though they serve different purposes, formative assessment and summative assessment can develop a seamless, mutually supportive relationship.
- 2 Communication of results:** The communication of assessment results must generate productive responses from learners and all stakeholders. Whether through feedback or grades, the communication of proficiency must serve as a catalyst for continual learning.
- 3 Accurate interpretation:** The interpretation of assessment results must be accurate, accessible, and reliable. This means the assessment items and tasks must accurately reflect the standards for gathering information. Essential to accurate interpretation are clear criteria, aligned inferences of what the criteria represent, and continual calibration to avoid inconsistencies or tangential influences.
- 4 Assessment architecture:** Assessment is most effective when it is planned, purposeful, and intentionally sequenced in advance of instruction by all those responsible for delivery. *Assessment architecture* is a blueprint that tightly sequences essential standards, teases out learning targets, identifies the assessments that reflect learning targets, and determines the use of assessments.
- 5 Instructional agility:** Being *instructionally agile* means teachers have the capacity to use emerging evidence to make real-time modifications within the context of the expected learning. Whether at the classroom or school level, the true power of assessment comes when emerging results determine what comes next in the learning.
- 6 Student investment:** There is a symbiotic relationship between assessment and self-regulation. When learners understand this, they are able to track their progress and reflect on what they are learning and where they need to go next.

Figure I.1: *The six assessment tenets.*