

Public Confidence from the Classroom Out

Using the B.C. performance standards to increase learner, teacher and school confidence

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Improving Schools From the Classroom Out

People outside our schools have a lot to say about the quality of public education. Our Ministers of Education say they want a ‘first rate’ and ‘top notch’ system, the Fraser Institute enjoys ranking schools from top to bottom, and policy-makers, politicians, parents and editorial writers all have views about how the system can be changed for the better.

In the meantime away from the media scrums and the policy debates, a network of teacher and principal colleagues are quietly working in classrooms and in school conference areas. These educators are working together to do better what they entered the profession to do – improve the learning performance of every learner in the key areas of literacy, applied mathematical problem solving, and decency in citizenship.

They are doing so using the B.C. teacher developed performance standards¹ as their tool for case study research. They are doing so over time – most of the Network² schools are now in their third year of inquiry. Network schools are engaged in what Canadian public opinion researchers and political journalists, Edward Greenspon and Darrell Bricker, describe as the Canadian quest for certainty in the quality of our public institutions. In the case of this group of educators, it is also a quest for improved learning performance and greater confidence in the credibility, reliability, and validity of classroom based assessment information. An increase in assessment confidence of learners, teachers, parents, and principals is one of the key outcomes of this inquiry.

Building Classroom Confidence

The first, and arguably the most important, level of confidence is noted in the classrooms of the students whose teachers are actively using a performance standard to help them learn more. Many teachers begin by using the writing performance standard. The typical pattern of use is one of sharing the grade level quick scales³ with the class. Often the students will spend several periods generating their own ideas about the qualities of effective writing and then comparing their ideas with the quick scale. This results in a ‘translation’ of the teacher language of the scales into student-friendly language appropriate for self-assessment. This development stage is followed by the opportunity for students to write and then to assess their own work. The next step is for individual students to confer with the teacher to establish a pattern of

¹ The B.C. performance standards in writing, reading, numeracy and social responsibility are available at www.bced.gov.bc.ca/classroom_assessment/perf_stands/

² The Network of Performance-Based Schools was formed in September, 1999. It now consists of 60 B.C. public schools actively involved in case study research.

³ The quick scales provide a four-level scoring guide for teachers based on broadly held provincial expectations for student work at that particular grade level.

strength and one specific area for growth. These areas are highlighted on the quick scale. After that the students write again – this time with a focus on strengthening the area in which growth is needed.

The work in action. Over time, students in performance standards classrooms gain experience in thoughtful self-assessment. The confidence that comes from working in this way was demonstrated recently in a small rural school in the Fraser Valley. Two grade six students led a discussion with school trustees at a public board meeting held at their school. They outlined how their classroom work using the writing performance standards is linked to the school's major improvement goal. Their explanation was as follows:

Our whole school is working on improving writing. To do so, we are using the writing performance standards so that as students we know where we need to grow as writers. Here are two pieces of our writing [shown on the overhead] and here is how we assess our writing using the grade six writing quick scale. We are both working to get our writing into the fully meets category.

They then answered questions from the trustees about their learning and school improvement work, including their school's initiatives in the area of social responsibility.

What did the parents and trustees see as they observed these young students? They saw students with confidence in their writing, confidence in their ability to know how to improve in a key area of literacy and confidence in their teacher and school. They also saw two students who understood how their school was working to help them grow as writers and as citizens.

Why does this matter? Through interviewing students, we have found that the specificity and personal goal setting that the quick scales provide, give learners a much stronger sense of both where they are and where they need to improve. The performance information is considered encouraging because it is clear. The teacher and the learner can come to a shared agreement as to the most important growth areas. Students in performance standards classrooms are much more likely than others to agree with the statements: "I know how my teacher assesses my work" and "I know how to improve."

Why Teachers and Parents Need Assessment Confidence

As teachers we entered the profession because we wanted to help students learn. Yet according to assessment researchers and education change theorists most of us approached our first teaching assignments with very weak backgrounds in assessing student performance in a fair, consistent, reliable and valid way. Some researchers go as far as describing many educators as "assessment illiterate."

Stiggins, for example, states:

The reason educators fear assessment and evaluation is that many don't understand it and therefore cannot gain control over it. But as we gain assessment wisdom we gain that control and anxiety dissipates....We have difficulty finding time to assess well because we lack knowledge of assessment tactics that can make our teaching job faster, easier and better. With assessment literacy comes the time to do the assessment job we are hired to do within the time allotted.

(Stiggins, 2002: p. 21)

We have found Fullan's definition of assessment literacy helpful in considering the issue of thoughtful assessment practice. Fullan defines assessment literacy as:

- The capacity of teachers and principals to examine student performance data and make critical sense of them (to know good work when they see it, to understand achievement scores [for example, concerning

literacy]. To disaggregate data to identify subgroups that may be disadvantaged or under-performing.

- The capacity to develop action plans based on the understanding gained from the aforementioned data analysis in order to increase achievement.
- The corresponding capacity to contribute to the political debate about the uses and misuses of achievement data in an era of high stakes accountability.

(Fullan, 2001; p. 117)

There is heated debate in many parts of the educational community about the uses and misuses of large-scale assessments and consequential accountability for schools and school districts. A thoughtful analysis of the B.C. provincial assessment scene would suggest that we are still a long way from the high stakes, commercially made, norm referenced, standardized test reality that exists in many parts of the world. We are, however, also aware that a Canadian public with a mindset searching for certainty in a changing economic, political, and educational landscape, is unlikely to be satisfied with an assessment response that implies, "I am the professional and I know best." Our public demands more and so do our parents.

As teachers many of us faced our first and subsequent parent teacher interviews with trepidation. Although we may have been skilled and competent in curriculum and instruction, we were ill at ease with assessment and reporting. We worked to appear confident and competent while feeling a degree of dread as parents approached our desks. To deal with our apprehension, many of us filled our marks' books with a vast array of numbers reflecting tests, assignments, and homework in an unspoken belief that 'more is better.' Teachers working in performance-based schools are dealing with this anxiety in a different way. By sharing the assessment guidelines with learners and then with their parents, and by conferencing and reporting about patterns of performance improvement, teachers are demonstrating growing levels of assessment literacy and professional confidence.

The work in action. Two stories may serve to illustrate the confidence that can come from using a performance-based assessment system. The first story takes place in an elementary school situated in a working class community outside Vancouver. Most parents in this school area do not have post-secondary education, yet like parents everywhere, they want the best for their children. For these parents, however, their willingness to help does not disguise the reality they share quite willingly, that they do not know how to help in specific skill areas. For instance, they do not feel confident or competent in providing editorial assistance for their own child's writing.

A proactive grade four teacher thought there was potential for the writing performance standards to assist both students and parents in the school community. She designed a performance-based shadow session. Parents (or grandparents, aunts, uncles, elders, older siblings or family friends) were invited to attend school for a morning with their child. For the half day, the focus was writing. Students and their adult partner shared the same writing opportunity, wrote their individual drafts, used the quick scales the class had translated into child and parent friendly language to assess their writing, and then made joint plans for writing improvement.

The parents (or adult partners) were interviewed at the end of the morning to determine:

1. if they understood the quick scale, and
2. if they felt they could use the quick scale language to help their child with their writing.

The parents were positive about their experience, they understood the scale and how to use it, and many

gave personal examples of the benefits of having the grade level standards clearly outlined. One father added, “Now I know what school today is like – it’s helpful.” This is a community where many parents report deeply unhappy memories of their own school experiences. The teacher and interviewer were encouraged in their belief that providing opportunities for parents and their children to spend time together in the classroom working with performance standards can play a helpful role in increasing parent confidence with supporting learning – and supporting the school as a whole.

The second story comes from a junior secondary school English department in a highly affluent neighborhood in the metro Vancouver area. Parent expectations at this school are high. There is a strong emphasis on high grades and a widely held desire for students to gain acceptance to prestigious universities. Teachers with limited confidence in their assessment ability often feel under siege at parent teacher interviews and threatened by parent pressure, real or perceived, for all students to excel. Again, the initiative of an action-oriented classroom teacher is leading to an important shift in the nature of the performance conversations between parents and teachers.

In this instance, parents were invited to attend an evening session at the school. They were introduced to the writing performance standards, were given exemplars of student work, and were then provided with a sample of their teenager’s own work to score. The conversation shifted from “Why aren’t you giving my son (or daughter) an A?” to “What can I do to help my son improve his writing?”

Once the talk was focused on the quality of the work rather than on the mark, teachers felt much more confident in making suggestions for growth and improvement. Parents and students need to know the basis upon which assessment decisions are made and then they need to know what actions will lead to improvement. As a result of the success of the initiative to build shared parent-student understanding within this one department, teachers in other departments in the school have become more open to sharing, to working collaboratively, and to engaging in more focused assessment work.

Building School Confidence

In an earlier paper we described the schools in the Network as schools with heart, schools that are smart, and schools that tell their stories in words and numbers. Working as school teams to collect student performance data, analyze the data, and make shared plans for learning improvement is integral to the Network. Schools are finding simple ways to create data displays to inform parents of their improvement efforts. Schools are gaining confidence in telling their stories with words and with numbers – even when those numbers are not initially positive. When the numbers are accompanied with a specific plan for improvement, both internal trust and external confidence grow.

Work in action. A case in point comes from a Network school that, after a year of working with the writing performance standards, compiled school wide data about the writing performance of their students. This information was reported to parents at evening meetings, at conference times, at a year end assembly and in an annual report. In addition, the school story was published in the 2000 edition of Findings from the Network of Performance Based Schools⁴.

The school decided to expand their focus on writing for a second year and worked hard in direct instruction on a number of specific skill areas. At the end of this second year, they again assessed school wide student work using the performance standards and to their dismay, the results indicated a slight decline in student performance. Instead of keeping this information to themselves, the school team

⁴ Each school in the Network annually writes a brief report of their action research. The school stories are then compiled, published and distributed.

explored the data and discovered that their growing sophistication in the use of the performance standards had led to more consistent assessment which was reflected in their judgment of student work. They developed confidence in their new understanding of their work and published the data accordingly. They and other Network members are interested to see what happens with their results this year.

Building Canadian Confidence

Canadians are searching for certainty in our public institutions. We want to know that our water supply is safe; we expect our medical professionals to have access to current information and equipment; and, we want evidence that our public schools are delivering on the promise of substantive learning gains for all kids. Parents, the media, politicians, researchers and any others who are curious, have access to data about our schools. Greenspon and Bricker suggest that “Canadians are less interested in the ranking of schools than they are in knowing that all schools could achieve five stars.” (2001: p. 172)

We believe that the development of five star schools requires confident public educators leading our schools. Individual confidence expressed by teachers working in isolation will not be enough. We think there is emerging evidence that use of the BC performance standards by teams of teachers with supportive principal leaders, leads to genuine learning gains in writing, reading, numeracy, and citizenship. These gains – and the confidence of public educators in articulating them – may help provide the certainty in our public schools that Canadians deserve.

References

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