

Capacity Building K-12

Inclusive and Equitable Assessment in Ontario Classrooms

In this monograph, the principles of inclusivity and equity are applied to the creation and administration of classroom assessments.

Inclusive and equitable classrooms respond to the “diversity of needs of all learners”, and are especially sensitive to groups traditionally vulnerable to exclusion from a quality education (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017). While much focus is placed on the diversity of *how* students learn, less attention is generally given to whether the assessment of that learning has been performed in an equitable fashion (Bourke & Mentis, 2014).

Since so much of our teaching is informed by assessments of what our students know, it is imperative that these assessments are as fair, inclusive, and equitable as possible.

Motivation

Fundamentally, inclusive assessment is fueled by a teacher’s respect “for the dignity and well-being of all students being assessed” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 55). By committing to inclusive and equitable assessment, teachers understand their power as assessors and the potential for assessment to be

“misused to control and discipline students rather than inform decisions about learning” (p. 55).

Essentials of Inclusive Assessment

At its heart, inclusive assessment aims to inform and assist as many students in the classroom as possible towards meeting learning expectations. By using transparent and consistent assessment methods, students become active partners in their learning journey (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017).

Maintain High Expectations

7 Steps To (n.d.) emphasizes that inclusive assessments are not intended to lower curriculum expectations, thus ensuring the success of traditionally vulnerable students. Instead, high expectations, and the impartial comparison of students to those expectations, is the cornerstone of inclusive and equitable assessment practices (Siegel et al., 2008).

Assessment Diversity

No assessment is truly objective (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017). Research has shown that even the multiple-choice test, impervious to the subjectivity of the assessor, can be inadvertently biased by the students themselves (see *Did You Know* inset).

Because each assessment type has its own unique set of biases, different assessments affect students in different ways – some positively, others negatively. Teachers may therefore consider diversifying the methods used to assess their students' learning (e.g., group presentations, open-response questions, laboratory work, portfolios, class discussions) (7 Steps To, [n.d.] & Rogers, 1996). In doing so, teachers help ensure that students disadvantaged by one assessment format can use others to demonstrate their learning of the course material.

Assessment Creation

Once the type of assessment has been chosen, focus turns to creating an assessment tool which “finds out what students really know while being fair to all” (Siegel et al., 2008, p.43).

Equitable Language

Word-choices and language play a significant role in developing equitable assessments. As Coelho (2016) states, “most assessment tasks measure reading and writing skills as much as, or even more so, than academic knowledge and skills” (p. 298). Clearly-worded and unambiguous questions ensure the assessment places the focus on the course content. This also means avoiding asking trick questions, since it is unlikely that being able to see through the trick is a legitimate curriculum expectation (Scott et al, 2014).

Did You Know?

Students who identify as male are more likely to guess during multiple-choice tests. As a result, using “total number correct” scoring improves their results compared to those of females. However, using “right-minus-wrong” formulaic scoring will place male students at an assessment disadvantage (Ben-Shakar & Sinai, 1991).

Cultural Relevance

Research conducted by Scott et al. (2014) reveals concerns from elementary teachers that assessment practices do not take prior cultural knowledge into account. Similar concerns regarding the fair assessment of Indigenous students are shared by principals, especially when considering that Indigenous cultures are based on oral traditions.

Authentic learning experiences and assessments which require students to focus on issues relevant to their daily lives are more culturally inclusive by nature. This is especially true when students can choose the topic of their assessment (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017).

To obtain an accurate picture of what students with cultural differences are capable of, teachers can also be on the look-out for assessment language which favours or discriminates against specific group(s) of students (Rogers, 1996).

Think About It

How much prior cultural knowledge is required for a math student to understand this assessment statement?

“Maria used a toonie to purchase an energy drink at the 7-Eleven.”

Students as Partners

Inclusive assessment practices find ways to directly embed students in the assessment process. As a first step, students can be taught to view assessment as a companion to their learning. Dispelling the concept of “assessment as punishment” helps students embrace assessment as a source of personal insight (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017).

Transparency

Students can use assessment to assist their learning when teachers are transparent about *what* is being assessed, and *how* it is being assessed. When scoring rules (such as rubrics) are revealed prior to the assessment, grading is no longer a secret activity. In this way, students are included in the assessment process because they are fully aware of what is expected of them (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017).

Developing Students’ Assessment Literacy

Prior to deploying an assessment tool, teachers are encouraged to create a scoring guide (or rubric) and share it with their students. Accompanying the rubric with examples of work at various levels of achievement provides students with an early opportunity to engage with the assessment criteria (Rogers, 1996).

Teachers can also use in-class examples as an opportunity to openly apply the rubric were such questions to appear on a quiz or test. In addition, by using the rubric to assess samples of their own work (*7 Steps To*, [n.d.]), students learn that taking ownership of their own learning is valued (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017).

Rubrics as Equity Tools...

- Provide transparent and unbiased marking criteria
- Ensure consistency and validity in marking
- Avoid norm-referenced “best-to-worst” grading
- Enable all students to identify the learning targets
- Completely describe requirements to receive full marks

- Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017

Equity During Assessment

Scott et al. (2014) remind us that younger students can become resentful of others who receive supplemental support during an assessment. Providing the same level of support and scaffolding to all students alleviates the risk of alienating those who do not think to ask for additional help, or lack the courage to do so. If a student asks you for clarification of a question in a one-on-one situation, consider sharing your answer with the entire class. If one student is given extra time to complete an assessment, consider providing that extension to all students. Ideally, any help provided to one student should be provided to all.

Classroom Discussions

The simplest of formative assessments, the classroom discussion, is an easily overlooked opportunity for equity and inclusion. When posing questions to their classrooms, it is important that teachers provide an amount of think-time which gives *all* of their students a chance to formulate a response. In doing so, teachers can avoid gravitating towards those students who are always quick to raise their hands. Keeping a mental note of who has already participated in a classroom discussion can help ensure their more hesitant students are included (Coelho, 2016).

Marking and Grading

Errors will always occur in assessment scoring, especially when a degree of subjectivity is required. However, with 59% of teachers feeling that a student's cultural background affects the grade they get (Scott et al., 2014), the equity issue may actually be rooted in the assessor's subconscious.

Scott et al.'s (2014) research data also suggests that gender differences in assessment results are linked with student behaviour. Boys were "perceived to be more likely to be disruptive and less compliant, which in turn influenced the grades that teachers assigned to them" (p. 57). The researchers conclude that "assessment must not be used as a mechanism to counter inappropriate student behaviour or reward desired behaviour" (p. 52).

For assessments which require marking or grading, the use of a marking rubric helps "ensure that results are not influenced by factors that are not relevant to the purpose of the assessment." (Rogers, 1996, p.8).

How Did My Strong Student Answer The Question?

Constructed-response assessments can be difficult to mark, as our diverse classrooms will inevitably produce a diverse range of responses. While it can be tempting to use previously marked work as a marking guide, such assessment practices constitute a form of norm-referenced assessment which has been criticized for bias against minorities (Drew, 1973). Rubrics, as unbiased criterion-referenced marking tools, help alleviate this temptation.

Did You Know?

Bonus marks constitute an assessment inequity, since overly-challenging test questions often go beyond the required curriculum expectations, or punishes those who require the full assessment time to demonstrate their learning of the base material. (Scott et al, 2014)

The Equity of Respecting Deadlines

When it comes to late and missed assignments, *Growing Success* (p. 43) notes the importance of applying consequence (such as deducting marks up to and including the value of the assignment). The lack of consequence for missed and late assignments constitutes an inequity for those students who respect your deadlines and work hard to meet them.

Celebrating All Progress

Once assessments are marked and returned to students, there is a final way to celebrate the diversity in our classrooms: by valuing the progress and achievements of *all* of our students. A student with a 60% average who scores 70% on a test is to be celebrated as much as a student who consistently achieves 90% (Inclusive Student Assessment, 2017).

Conclusion

This discussion of inclusive and equitable assessment practices has focused on ensuring students are assessed purely on what they know rather than who they are. Assessment transparency provides students with a clear set of expectations and involves them in the assessment process, while a marking rubric can be an effective way of neutralizing the subjectivity of the assessor.

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