

The Dark Side of Assessment Literacy: Avoiding the Perils of Accountability

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Abstract

Educational assessment literacy will yield a variety of positive benefits, especially broadening the range of learning outcomes. But in the context of education accountability as currently structured in American schools, such efforts also may lead teachers to become more sophisticated in test preparation activities and to narrow both their instruction and classroom assessment practices specifically to enhance state accountability assessments. This article explains why that is so, describes the process by which it occurred in one state, and offers specific suggestions as to how it might be avoided.

sampling, teacher attitudes, teacher commitment.

-stakes assessment, matrix

For nearly three decades, prominent experts in educational measurement have stressed the importance of assessment literacy (Popham, 2006, 2009, 2011; Stiggins, 1991, 1995; Xu & Brown, 2016). Some argue it may be the single most cost-effective way to improve our schools (Popham, 2018a). Assessment literacy is

JHQHUDOO\ WKRXJKW RI DV ³WKH NQRZOHGJH DERXW how to assess what students know and can do, interpret the results of these assessments, and apply these results to improve student learning and program effe FWLYHQHV002, p.:H E E

More recently Popham (2018b) described it as VLP SO\ ³DQ LQGLYLGXD O¶V XQGHUVWDQGLQJ RI WKH fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence HGXFDWLRQDO GHFLVLRQV ´ S

Development of Accountability

scores were not reliable at the individual student level; *only* at the school level. Since accountability focused on the school level, however, this issue was of little consequence.

Commitment of Teachers

Teachers want their students to succeed in school and to be confident in themselves as learners. They also want to feel they can influence that success. These aspirations extend to the use of performance-based assessments that are part of accountability systems. Because of the important consequences attached to results from these assessments for students, for their families, for school leaders, and for the teachers assessments typically becomes a vital concern.

The Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) was clearly high-stakes for schools, school leaders, and teachers. It included financial rewards for schools that showed improved results and sanctions for schools that were not improving. State officials encouraged schools to provide teachers with the training necessary to prepare students for the new challenges of these performance-based assessments in science and other subjects.

Policy with Consequences Drives Practice

of attaching high-stakes consequences to the results of performance assessments in science were profound. Not only did teachers begin to allocate more time to science lessons, they altered the way they taught science and the way they measured student learning on classroom assessments. Science lessons at all levels included more experiments and lab projects, and assessments involved data summary and interpretation, often integrating mathematics skills (Oldham, 1994).

The pressure for improvement in scores prompted many schools to devise professional development programs focused on the assessment formats and scoring procedures included in the accountability program (Cody & Guskey, 1997). A Rand investigation showed, for example, that all surveyed principals reported encouraging teachers to use materials specifically designed to guide instruction (Cody & Guskey, 1997; Kowtr Barron, Mitchel, & Stecher, 1996). As a result, teachers included more performance tasks and authentic experiments as part of their instruction in science. They also taught students strategies for adapting their reporting based on specific scoring rubrics (Guskey & Oldham, 1996).

Funding Drives Policy

instructional practices were short-lived. A newly elected group of state legislators who did not fully understand the matrix sampling procedures and were not particularly assessment literate raised concerns about assessment costs. Developing and piloting the performance events was costly. Scoring performance tasks was both time-consuming and expensive. In addition, although accountability remained focused at the school level, these legislators were concerned about the lack of reliability of scores at the individual student level.

Their response to these concerns was to impose drastic changes in the science assessments. Specifically, they wanted the assessments to require less time to administer and score in order to reduce the per-student costs. In addition, they wanted the assessment program to yield reliable data at the individual student level rather than just the school level.

Meeting these demands from legislators left the educational measurement experts who directed KIRIS with few options. The performance events were eliminated from the science assessments, as were the portfolios of student work that had been a foundational component of the language arts assessments. The statewide accountability assessments were returned to a more limited response format consisting of mostly multiple-choice items with a few extended-response items in each subject area.

The response of teachers to these changes in assessment format was predictable and immediate. Wanting to ensure their students did well on the new, restricted-response format science assessments, teachers revised their classroom assessments to more closely parallel the state assessments in science. Instructional strategies that resembled the performance events were abandoned in favor of activities and practices that prepared students for the more limited response format of multiple-choice items and brief, extended-response items.

As numerous studies have shown, teachers focus on the content tested and the way it is tested (Herman, 2004; Herman & Linn 2014). Arguments posed by state leaders in science education that students would do well on these restricted-response assessments when taught through a more inquiry-based approach to science fell on deaf ears. The teachers felt compelled to prepare their students for precisely what they would be asked to do on the new restricted-response, accountability assessments.

New Focus on Assessment Literacy

So what will result today from increasing
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 construct authentic assessments that tap

V W X G H Q W ¶ V S H U R U P D Q F H L Q U
 It will help teachers design assessments that yield reliable results and are well-aligned with high level, cognitively complex student learning goals. Teachers will also know better how to gain valuable evidence from demonstrations, performances, projects, exhibits, and digital portfolios that can be used to guide improvements in instruction and student learning.

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 will improve their use of assessment results to guide the correction of learning errors and help them become better managers and self-regulators of their own learning. Enhancing the assessment literacy of parents, families, and community members will inform their interpretations of assessment results. They will better understand what assessment results mean and the limitations of those results when drawing conclusions about the quality of instructional programs and schools.

But in the context of high-stakes accountability, where assessment-based decisions have serious and sometimes irreversible impact on the lives of students and their teachers both during school and afterward,

students better prepared for success in school and beyond are vitally important.

With greater assessment literacy, policy-makers and legislators can demand better quality products from the vendors they hire assessments.

They will understand the diverse assessment formats this requires, particularly performance events, projects, demonstrations, will understand the difference between

reliability at the school level versus the individual student level, and know how school level reliability opens up a broader range of authentic assessment formats that can be employed with reasonable cost.

Increasing Assessment literacy among stakeholders in the assessment process will help improve our schools, but only if efforts also target the policy-makers and legislators who make the important decisions about the format and structure of high-stakes assessments.

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