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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship between assessment and decision making in one of five school districts participating in a national study. Data collected in two alternative elementary schools (one literature-based and one informal) in a large urban school district in Ohio included field notes of classroom observations during reading and language arts periods, and audiotaped, semi-structured interviews with students, parents, teachers, principals, and district-level administrators. Analysis revealed patterns of consensus across both schools regarding the top-down nature of curricular decisions and the importance of school-based support among teachers and administrators. Patterns of tension included concerns about the intrusive nature of standardized testing on both classroom time and out-of-class professional time, dilemmas surrounding the manner and time of preparation for such tests, and the use of classroom-based assessments as documentation for letter grades. The principals in both buildings served as mediators for tensions to shelter teachers and students from excessive pressures related to standardized testing. (Contains 16 references; interview schedules for administrators, principals, teachers, and students are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from one of five school districts participating in a national study of the relationship between assessment and decision making in elementary schools. Data collected in two alternative schools in a large urban school district included field notes of classroom observations and audiotaped semi-structured interviews with students, parents, teachers, principals, and district-level administrators. Analysis revealed patterns of consensus across both schools regarding the top-down nature of curricular decisions and the importance of school-based support among teachers and administrators. Patterns of tensions included concerns about the intrusive nature of standardized testing on both classroom time and out-of-class professional time, dilemmas surrounding the manner and time of preparation for such tests, and the use of classroom-based assessments as documentation for letter grades. The principals in both buildings served as mediators for tensions described above to shelter teachers and students from excessive pressures related to standardized testing.

Assessment and Decision Making in Two Schools: The Ohio Site

The role of assessment in elementary classrooms varies depending upon the instruments of assessment, their purpose and frequency in school settings, and the use and interpretation of results. Mosenthal (1989) notes the wider use of standardized tests and minimum competence tests as demanded by those responsible for evaluation at the national, state, and local levels. The increasing presence of such tests in schools raises the question of the relationship between assessments that are developed outside the classroom and instructional decisions that are made inside the classrooms.

Some educators and researchers argue that such tests determine what is taught in the classroom (Tierney & McGinley, 1987; Valencia & Pearson, 1987). The perceptions of teachers and administrators of the impact of standardized tests on curriculum was examined by Ross (1988), and Colvin-Murphy (1988), who found that the majority of the educators in their studies felt that standardized tests were very influential in determining the curriculum in elementary schools today. Others argue that although a relationship between tests and curriculum may raise scores, it does not necessarily contribute to better educational opportunities for elementary students (Farr & Carey, 1986; Madaus, 1985).

This study is part of a larger research project developed to examine the relationship between assessment and instruction by viewing the decision-making process from a variety of perspectives within school districts in two states. The project was undertaken to learn how standardized tests affect lives in particular classrooms and school districts. In order to explore the extent to which testing "drives" instruction, the research team studied five school districts, each with unique relationships between testing and instruction. For instance, one research site relied heavily on the use of test scores to understand student progress. In contrast, researchers chose another district with a reputation for relying more on classroom-based teacher assessments as documentation to inform instruction. (For reports of four districts, see Stephens et al., 1993; Weinzierl, et al., 1993; Stephens, Rodriguez, et al., 1993; Shelton, et al., 1993.) This paper focuses on one of the five sites studied.

Methodology

Site Description

The two schools participating in this study at the Ohio site, are part of a large school district in the midwest serving 6,500 students. In fact, it is the 13th largest school district in the United States. Forty-nine percent of the district's students are minority, and approximately 30% participate in free or reduced-price lunch programs, due to low family income. Within this district there are 1,200 teachers employed at 88 elementary schools. One fourth of the schools are designated as alternative schools, each with a specific curricular emphasis such as literature, informal, arts, language immersion, science, math, or sports.

In response to our formal request to conduct this study in both an alternative and a traditional elementary building, the district's central administration gave us permission to contact two traditional and two alternative schools. However, the principals of the two traditional schools declined to participate and reported that there were no teachers in their buildings who wished to be part of the study. Consequently, data collection was limited to the two alternative schools that were willing to cooperate with us. One of these schools (School A) was described as literature-based and the other (School B) was described as informal. The principals at these schools each recommended two teachers who, in turn, agreed to work with us. We also contacted parents and students for volunteers to be interviewed. We then contacted the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the district who agreed to be interviewed.

Both schools in the study use a lottery system to select their student populations. This results in a mix of students who attend the school by choice because of the school's proximity to their homes and those who attend because their parents prefer the expressed philosophy of the school. School A, located within the inner city, was designated as an alternative, literature-based school only 2 years prior to the data collection period. Forty-four percent of its 268 students are minority. School B has been designated as an alternative, informal school for over 15 years and is located near a large state-supported university. Forty percent of its 375 students are minority students coming both from middle- or upper-class homes and from poor homes. Seventy-five percent of the children at School A participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program, compared with 35-40% of the children at School B.

Data Collection

Procedures for data collection at the Ohio site were similar to those at the other sites in the study and focused on both interviews and observations. Two grade 2 through grade 5 teachers in each elementary school participated in this study. Both of us observed each of the four classrooms during the reading and language arts periods for either one or two sessions, for a total of 3 half-days per classroom. Therefore, each classroom was visited at least once by each researcher in order to provide observer triangulation (Denzin, 1978).

Prior to each observation, we briefly interviewed the teachers about what we might expect to see. During each observation, field notes were taken about the physical organization of the room, movement of students, scheduled activities, and conversations of students and the teacher. We noted questions that arose during each observation and later conducted interviews with the teacher to clarify notes. During one of the interviews, the teacher was asked to respond to a set of prepared questions concerning decision making in her classroom. Additional interviews, also based upon a specific set of questions, were conducted with the assistant superintendent for curriculum for the district, each building principal, parents of 2 or 3 children in each classroom and 3 students in each classroom (see appendix A for list of interview questions). The curricular decisions made in the classroom setting could then be viewed within the larger context of the decisions made outside classroom by central office personnel, principals, and parents. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, resulting in approximately 400 pages of interview and field note data.

Data Analysis

We began data analysis with a description of each of the four classrooms, based on the observation field notes, clarifications provided by each teacher during the post-observation interviews, and student interviews. We asked the teachers to read our descriptions of their classrooms as member checks to establish the credibility of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also provided brief descriptions of each school based on researcher observations and principal, parent, and student interviews. One teacher, however, had moved and could not be located. Of the other three, two chose to give us feedback, which was then incorporated in the revisions.

When the school and classroom "portraits" were completed, we examined all of the transcripts to locate general patterns and themes related to assessment and decision making that emerged across the data, particularly within and across the interview data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We highlighted sections of the transcripts that related to these patterns and themes and incorporated representative quotes in the descriptions of cross-case "consensus and tensions." These findings are organized around the interviews with the teacher, the principal, and the superintendent for instruction. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all persons and districts involved.

Portraits of the Classrooms: School A

Two years before the study began, School A was an abandoned building, void of children and books, teaching and learning. As a proposal emerged for a new alternative school using literature to integrate all curricular areas, the empty building was filled with activity: a staff was selected and materials were ordered. Supplies, equipment, and library books were assembled from other elementary buildings, and the work of developing a new alternative school in the inner city was begun. The building goals were articulated by the principal as giving

> children an opportunity to succeed, to have continuous progress, to have children really working at their level and at their pace and not being penalized because they may not be at the same level as their peers.
>
> Principal A, Interview 4/9

Translating these goals into practice, however, was challenging. Because School A's designation as an alternative school was so recent, the student population represented a mix of students whose parents had requested that their children be placed in the literature-based school and students who attended the school because of its proximity to their homes. The parents of neighborhood students were not always aware of or in agreement with the specific philosophy of School A. The school also faced financial challenges because funding for new instructional materials and books was slim. Consequently, materials were a hodge podge of donations from other buildings. The school staff included both new and veteran teachers, from a variety of buildings, who grappled with the challenge of developing a cohesive faculty. Staff turn-over rates were high the first 2 years, further complicating the goal of developing a long-term teacher commitment to the school, to the students, and to the building philosophy. The growing pains continued through the challenges of deciding building operating procedures, communicating the goals of the school to local and prospective families, and selecting policies that would be consistent with other district schools and rewriting those that would be unique.

The celebration of literature was immediately evident to us as we entered the school. Books, projects, writings, and the children's own books and posters filled the hallways. There were products of author-illustrator studies, invitations to read and write, displays of children's own books with beautifully designed covers, posters of African American heroes (about whom they can read), and a reading house with a sign: "A House is for Reading." During a tour of the building, the principal explained to us that, in each classroom, the teacher read to students every day, the students wrote in journals daily, and teachers taught language arts through teacher-created thematic units with children's literature as the central component.

School A: Grades 2/3

Ms. Somers, a first-year teacher, enjoyed teaching in an alternative school rather than a traditional school where "they are too worried about just meeting objectives and not looking at each individual child and knowing there are individual differences." (Ms. Somers, Interview 5/2)

The physical arrangement of Ms. Somers' classroom featured 20 individual desks arranged in the shape of a U (she often spoke to the class standing at the open section), a carpeted library area in the back of the room where students met in large and small groups to read and listen to stories, and a small table close to the windows, with supplies children could use to make their own books. Two additional student desks were near the teacher's desk in the front of the room. Ms. Somers explained that those two students were often disruptive and needed more isolated work spaces. A mixture of student projects and teacher-made charts of birthdays, jobs, and classroom rules covered the walls and bulletin boards. Most of the assignments in Ms. Somers' room focused on a theme selected in conjunction with the other

teachers in her planning team. During our observations, the students explored "Houses" through books, art, and writing.

On a typical morning, Ms. Somers greeted the students individually as they arrived. Without direction, the students immediately took out their journals and responded to teacher prompts such as: "What would your dream house look like?" or "If I were the teacher I would..." As the children wrote, Ms. Somers walked inside the U-shaped desk arrangement, monitoring individual students' progress and making brief encouraging comments to the entire class. She then invited students individually to "circle time" on the rug. She called quiet students with clear desks first. The students sat "Indian style" and listened to a story and explanation of the morning's work. On the chalkboard near the rug was a list of the morning's assignments:

1. Language Arts - your dream house
2. Spelling - picture words
3. Writing - paint a house

Field notes, 5/2

When the students had returned to their seats, the teacher asked them to draw their dream house, fold a large sheet of paper into eight sections to write and illustrate each spelling word (all related to houses), and begin writing a story about their dream house. For the rest of the morning, the teacher met with small groups of students who had chosen to read books related to the "houses" theme. Ms. Somers talked briefly with students in each group about what they had read so far, and then assigned them a book-related extension such as picking a favorite color, drawing something of that color, and writing a poem about what they had drawn. The teacher also conducted brief reading and writing conferences with individual students, providing general encouragement and specific suggestions for improvement.

T: (to the class). I still hear voices. (to the student). Read this to me. (Student reads what she has written)

T: This is a really good start. I like how you said you remembered the rooms. And your commas. Tell me what room you liked and why. What do you do in the rooms? And do the ending information. Do it on this paper first and then do a final copy. What part did you like?

S: The store.

T: What will be in the store?

S: (inaudible)

T: Okay, really good start.

Field notes 5/4

In this classroom, children could choose books to read from several selected by the teacher; assignments selected by the teacher were usually related to either a theme or a book connected to that theme, and there was evidence of integrating reading and language arts with art activities. There were also, however, consistent and pervasive attempts by the teacher to control student behavior. As a first-year teacher, Ms. Somers relied heavily upon behavior modification tactics to encourage appropriate student

behaviors. At the beginning of each week, students were given five stamps on a paper taped to their desk. Stamps were crossed out for each incident of bad behavior. Stamps remaining at the end of the week could be used to purchase rewards. Ms. Somers punctuated talk about books with comments such as:

> If you're not good listeners, you won't know what to do when you get back to your seats and you'll lose a stamp.
>
> I'll give you two minutes to get started or you'll lose one of your stamps. I warned you! 30 seconds. 20 seconds. 15. 10.
>
> Put your heads down --- you owe me time for the noise this morning.
> Keep your hands folded and your eyes on me -- remember, if you get sent back during circle time it means losing a stamp.
>
> Field notes 5/2 & 5/3

A great deal of instructional time was spent clarifying the rules regarding the stamps. One student, for example, wanted to know how many stamps she could lose and still get a reward. As other students noted one of the researchers writing field notes, rumors passed from child to child that detentions were being recorded. When the teacher overheard this comment, she explained that notes were not being taken to monitor their behavior but were about all of the room because they had such a special class. Although Ms. Somers claimed to focus her instruction on the needs of individual students, a belief/practice conflict appeared to be confirmed during classroom observations: assignments were made with little regard for the individual capabilities of students, and significant class time was spent in monitoring large-group behavior. When a student was asked "What do you think are some of the decisions your teacher made about you this year?" the student replied, "How good I sit in a circle and if I don't run in the classroom and how good my behavior is."

School A: Grades 4-5

The grades 4-5 teacher, Ms. Atwell, described the philosophy of School A as focusing on the individual qualities of children in a manner quite similar to Ms. Somers'.

> I know that here we believe that kids need to be looked at as individuals. If you really believe that, it makes the way you set up the situation for learning very different. You can't have a pack of dittos and pass the same thing out to every one in the class. They have to break off and become involved in what they want.
>
> Ms. Atwell 6/1

The similarities between the two classrooms in School A also extended to the arrangement of the room and the use of thematic planning. As in Ms. Somers's classroom, the desks in Ms. Atwell's room were arranged in a U-shape. In the center of this U, however, was a carpeted area used for large and small group meetings. Small cases of books that were used as reference tools for individuals and small groups also faced the inside of the desk arrangement. The teacher's desk was a part of the U, with student desks surrounding it. In the back of the room was a television on a stand, a large table surrounded by eight chairs used for small-group meetings, more shelves with books, and a countertop with a computer and a sink. Displayed on the walls were teacher-made charts containing assignments students could select during worktime. One chart, for example, had five pockets holding worksheets, all dealing with

fractions. Another chart, titled "Interest Fair," contained large paper flowers, each with a student's name and the project she or he had selected for a science project.

A bulletin board in the back combined African masks and stories created by the students with a list of suggested activities students might complete to learn more about China. Each activity included specific directions for its completion such as "Chinese Numbers (listen to tape recorder)" and "Chopstick Challenge (pick up Cheerios)." Ms. Atwell explained that she organized her classroom around thematic units with centers of activities such as those described above.

> At the beginning of the year, I try to get a framework of what my thematic units will be. I look at the objectives [from the district's course of study] and that helps. When I put the units together, I try to fit them all in. Sometimes I don't. I don't think everyone fits them all in. I might say a few sentences and say I covered one or I might have an elaborate project that covers a few at once. I might have a center that does one at a time. I use my judgment on how much time needs to be spent on each thing.
>
> Ms. Atwell, Interview 6/1

Ms. Atwell grouped students for reading instruction based upon their interest in a variety of books she had selected. Their choices, however, went beyond those offered to the students in Ms. Somers room, because the students not only selected what book they wanted to read, but also chose (as a group and/or as individuals) how they wished to respond to that book. During one observation, for example, six students were working with the teacher in the hall as they created a large mural depicting scenes from *Call It Courage* (Sperry, 1940). Meanwhile, other students read their books in preparation for a discussion and planning meeting with the teacher. Later that morning, students nearing completion of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1961) met with Ms. Atwell to brainstorm possible projects:

> Pick a real short project to work on Friday and Monday. Let's list what we might want to do:
>
> 1. make a model of the house
> 2. make an advertising poster
> 3. book summary
> 4. your own list of witches' rules
> 5. make a book of spells
> 6. recipe for witches' brew
>
> Field notes 6/1

Before leaving the group, each student selected a project, briefly talked with the teacher about materials needed, and went back to his or her seat to begin work independently.

Student selection of texts and projects formed important parts of Ms. Atwell's efforts to individualize instruction. She explained, however, that she based grouping decisions not only on the interests of the students, but also on ability. Ms. Atwell used individual reading conferences to document student

progress and to assist her in making decisions about grouping students with similar needs. She used a single-sheet "Reading Conference Record" with Likert-style organization that enabled her to record evaluations quickly. Included on her record were observations of student enjoyment, as well as comprehension strategies such as main idea, supporting details, sequence of events, predicting outcomes, cause and effect, and drawing conclusions (which were all taken from the district's course of study). On other sections of the sheet, Ms. Atwell rated students' oral reading in terms of both fluency and accuracy (omissions, additions, repetitions, substitutions, and self-corrections). The record also contained places to write brief comments about the appropriateness of the selection for the student and recommendations for future instruction.

Close observation of students during conferences enabled Ms. Atwell to document student reading achievement and to make grouping decisions, but she also used the information to decide how best to support a student who wished to read a challenging book rather than to deny the student the opportunity to read the book because it might be too difficult.

> I try to give as much information about the story as I can to help them read it successfully. I get a feel for kids that are capable of certain things or have certain needs and I pull them together.
>
> Field notes 6/1

The classroom's focus on the individual was also evident in a variety of presentations by individuals to the rest of the class. One student, for example, used a model rocket he had built to explain what he had learned about the movement of rockets. Using the chalkboard, he demonstrated the location and use of fuel chambers and fielded a variety of questions from the other students following his presentation.

In contrast to Ms. Somer's class, the students in Ms. Atwell's room displayed a significantly higher level of involvement in the making of instructional decisions. In terms of teaching style, Ms. Atwell could be characterized more as a facilitator than a monitor of student behavior. Occasionally, when the noise level rose, Ms. Atwell would make a brief comment encouraging students to lower their voices, but threats were noticeably absent. Although the class rules and consequences were clearly displayed on a chart on the closet doors, there were no threats or warnings by the teacher or noticeable deviant behavior by students during the three observations.

Portraits of the Classrooms: School B

School B is an old building located in a moderate-to-low income area near a large university. The rooms and hallways are spacious, colorfully painted, and decorated with displays of student work. As one parent said, "I felt that [school B] was the happiest environment in the system. You could feel it when you walked in the building."

The parent handbook for School B describes the philosophy of the school as "built primarily and fundamentally on a firm knowledge of child development and the best we know about how children learn." Like School A, the focus is primarily on the individual needs of the students.

> The informal philosophy recognized the unique growth of each child and provides a personalized as well as individualized experience for that child.
>
> School Handbook 5/89

The organization of informal classrooms is described as

> arranged in centers of interest for learning but the various areas of the curriculum are not segregated by either time or space. The program provides a fully-integrated curriculum in which there is a free flow between the subject areas, thereby reflecting the reality of the interrelatedness of all human knowledge.
>
> School Handbook 5/89

Although the espoused philosophies of the two schools bear strong similarities, we also identified major differences. School B has been an informal school for more than 15 years. The principal of School B believes that, compared with the other alternative schools in the district,

> because we were the first ones, we got most of the opportunities. The rest of the alternative schools have a piece of the pie -- we have the whole pie. We have everything that you could ever dream of having in your school.
>
> Principal B, Interview, 10/31

The advantages of longevity quickly became apparent to us as we compared the two schools. School B functions completely as an alternative school, with neighborhood students attending because of the school's philosophy about education rather than the school's proximity to their home.

> I guess you have to bear in mind that this is an alternative school and by the very fact that we picked this school, means that we made a decision about the course of direction we want our child's education to go....We are here because we want to be here.
>
> Parent, Interview, 11/15

Because of the accumulation of books purchased with a $10,000 yearly literature budget, materials and supplies in School B were more readily available to support teachers as they planned than they were in School A. The stability of the school also fostered low teacher turn-over and absence rates in School B. The principal of School B attributed part of the stability of the faculty to the opportunities teachers had to work within the school's decision-making process.

> I think that the teachers here feel that they have a great deal to say about the decision-making process in this building. The longer I do it [involve teachers in building decisions], the more I am comfortable with it and the more they are comfortable with it. It requires competency. The buck stops with all of us, not just me.
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

School B: Grades 4-5

Ms. Young worked at three conventional schools before coming to School B 5 years ago. She regarded her former principals as inflexible and was thinking about changing schools when the principal of School B asked her to consider teaching at the informal school. She was particularly pleased that her plans no longer had to reflect fragmented, isolated time blocks for individual subject areas; instead, she was encouraged to plan integrated units with the three other teachers in her team.

> Let's say that I want to do a unit of U.S. history or the westward movement. I will get together some resources and I will look at the basals or library units and also take a look at the course of study to see what I need to think about covering. I do a unit plan where I web an idea. The four of us [the team] will take it back to our classrooms. [Planning] depends on the interest of the students or the resources that we have. There might be parents who are very interested in arts and crafts. Someone else might be into pioneer cooking or someone who works at the historical museum might come in and share. It depends on the classroom and it depends on the year.
>
> Ms. Young, Interview, 10/18

Unlike the classrooms in School A, Ms. Young's classroom was not governed by a desk arrangement. Students' personal supplies and belongings were stored in "cubbies," and a variety of tables and chairs were organized into many work spaces with varying purposes. A long table near the front of the room faced a chalkboard where the teacher often met with small groups of students to work on math assignments. In the center of the room was a large carpeted area where large-group planning meetings were held. The students used a loft, near the rug area, as a quiet place to enjoy their favorite book. Other tables and book shelves housed science materials as well as cages containing the class rabbit, gerbils, and a bird. A variety of history books were organized toward the back of the room, under displays of student work that included rubbings of grave stones, insect charts, and reports from an insect study trip.

To begin a typical day, the students and the teacher met on the rug for an explanation of the day's activities. On an easel, the teacher had written a general list of activities for the entire day as well as specific tasks to be completed during the morning worktime.

> October 25
>
> pumpkin painting
> Haikus
> Russian lesson (led by local high school students)
> LLC (Library Learning Center)
> Worktime:
> 1. 10 complete sentences
> 2. math practice, graveyard math
> 3. penmanship (U, u)
> 4. group math - Red I
> 5. Russian lesson
> 6. Special projects:
>
> Smith farms
> Downtown Columbus
> Skyline poetry
>
> Field Notes 10/25

Assignment #1 required each student to write sentences using the weekly list of vocabulary and spelling words that were thematically related to the class's study of the architecture of downtown buildings. During biweekly tests, Ms. Young read aloud definitions for the week's vocabulary words, and students were expected to supply the word that matched the definition and to spell it correctly. Accuracy percentages were then recorded in the grade book. For assignment #2, the students practiced addition and subtraction using rubbings they had made on tombstones during a recent field trip to a cemetery. As they created story problems for each other, they explored questions such as "How old was s/he when

s/he died?" and "Which spouse was older?" Other morning projects included practicing the assigned cursive letter that would be tested the following week and completing special projects in preparation for an upcoming open house. As the students worked on the assignments, the teacher met with small groups and, when needed, in brief conferences with individuals.

Ability groups in both math and reading (4 or 5 each) were developed at the beginning of the year using informal inventories. In addition to math ability groups, random math groups were also organized periodically to work on math skills using instructional techniques that integrated math with art and language arts. During one observation, for example, students were exploring "pumkinometry" in six randomly assigned small groups. Each group was given a multi-page worksheet on which to record responses to measurement questions dealing with volume, circumference, weight, and diameter of a pumpkin. The group members also used their observations of the pumpkin as a springboard for language arts activities.

> T: Think of at least 8 words to describe your pumpkins. Then think of 6 ways you could use your pumpkin. Your answers should be realistic. Use your imagination but explain how it could happen. For instance, if you said your pumpkin could fly...
>
> S: You need to explain how that could happen.
>
> T: Right. The next question is, if your pumpkin could talk, what would it say now? Then, on the next page, sketch your jack-o-lantern and show me the sketch before you start carving.
>
> Field Notes 10/16

When discussing her reading program, Ms. Young explained that

> Reading is done the entire day, but we have sustained silent reading for an hour after lunch. At that time I meet every day with a reading group. Like today, I met with 4 or 5 students in a reading group. I introduce a book according to their grade level. The reading groups are based on the reading inventory that I do on each child at the beginning of the year.
>
> Ms. Young, Interview 10/18

Ms. Young selected multiple copy sets of books for each group and assigned students to groups according to their ability level. Ms. Young explained that when the group first meets

> I introduce the book and I might present a question for interest or motivation. We go over the title, author, contents, how many chapters. Then, no matter what level [they] are in, I either read the first chapter which they follow along in their own books or as many pages as possible if it is a long chapter.
>
> Ms. Young, Interview 10/18

The students then read the assigned text during sustained silent reading and met on a later date to respond to questions the teacher had developed. Ms. Young often used books with corresponding teacher guides that helped her develop comprehension questions. The students then were expected to answer the questions before discussing the book.

> I don't want to discuss the story and then have them write the answers because that doesn't tell me if they understood on their own or after discussion. It is OK to understand and lean from a discussion, but I want to note what they learn on an individual basis.
>
> Ms. Young, Interview 10/18

Although the physical arrangement of this classroom was untraditional, and much of the planning was thematic, many of the features of the organization were consistent with a teacher-driven curriculum commonly found in more traditional settings. In this classroom, student choice was limited to which assignment to do first: Texts were assigned by the teacher; group discussions revolved around teacher-generated questions aimed at assessing comprehension; ability groups were inflexible throughout the year in both reading and math; creative writing assignments were usually based on teacher prompts; the teacher read stories without pauses for student discussion or reflection; and the handwriting program was both skill-based and sequential.

School B: Grades 2-3

The physical arrangement of Ms. Smith's classroom was similar to that of Ms. Young's room across the hall: students' personal belongings stored in cubbies, various work stations throughout the room, and a large rug in the center of the class. In this room, however, "rug time" was not only central to the typical daily schedule (meetings held at 9:00, 11:00, 2:00, and 3:00), but was also central to instructional decisions. It was a time for students and teacher to collaboratively plan worktime, discuss the progress and needs of individuals and small groups, problem-solve organization and behavior difficulties, share individual and small-group projects, and talk about books in depth. Assignments were much less teacher-directed than in Ms. Young's class, and the role of the teacher was more that of a facilitator than a task assigner and evaluator. Although class discussions were led by the teacher (called Beth by the students), there was considerably more student input in every instance. When Beth read a story, she introduced the book by relating it to what the students were studying or other books they had read, and often paused during the reading to ask questions about what the students were thinking about the story and what might happen next. Individual opinions were expected, and all answers were accepted.

Beth's planning typically encompassed several themes simultaneously. During our observations, activities in her room centered on animals, Russia, and literature selections she had collected that dealt with "Becoming Real." General guidelines regarding assignments were posted on the bulletin board, but were regarded as work that must be completed over several days rather than in a single morning. Beth consistently expressed her expectations of quality work; she provided the students with significantly longer time periods for completing an activity than did Ms. Young.

Instructional decisions appeared focused more on the individual nature of students' needs rather than the completion of a sequence of skills. For example, a small group of students was using a variety of resource books to prepare for writing reports on animals. One student was using the dictionary to locate information about foxes' dens:

Child: I don't have the patience to look it up.

Beth: Bring it over and I'll help you. Show me how you are doing it.

Child: I know that den is D and I'm reading three pages of D's.

Beth: Instead of looking through pages of D's, you go to the next letter. (assists the child)

Child: (triumphantly!) Here it is!!!

Field Notes 10/18

Such teacher-student interactions were a large part of instruction in Beth's room. The contributions of the student were consistently honored, and the role of the teacher was more to scaffold the student toward independence.

Reading instruction, for example, was always child-centered and individualized. During the hour-long sustained silent reading time each afternoon, Beth first assisted individuals in the selection of books to read either independently or in pairs and documented the student's selections on file cards. Individual students were then called to read a favorite part of their books with her.

> I use a lot of check lists to see who is getting what work done. I have cards and a notebook that I jot things down in. I save a lot of work. I have folders of work.
>
> Ms. Smith, Interview 11/21

Beth used large file cards to document student progress during the reading conferences we observed. During one conference, for example, as Sammy read, Beth prompted him at difficult places, encouraging him to predict what the word might be, asking him if the word made sense, and encouraging him to use the picture to figure out the unknown word. Within the context of this one-on-one exchange, Beth's instructional decisions were consistently based on what the student was doing and on her understanding of the student's strengths and weaknesses as a reader.

> I try to make Sammy feel good about the things he has done. He has a hard time remembering the phonetic sounds. He has to use that, even though we don't stress using that. He is a pretty good speller. He needs a lot of basic skill work. He is very observant. He looks at books. He can get a lot of meaning from the picture. He is an artist. He makes a lot of elegant connections. I try to get him to talk about those things. If he knows something, I want him to talk about it so he will use that skill more often.
>
> Beth, Interview 11/21

Students such as Sammy met with Beth more frequently than more capable students whose progress might be checked during brief exchanges about what they were reading. Following each conference, Beth recorded her observations on the large file cards.

The individual encounters with students formed the basis for Beth's decisions about grades. In the absence of a grade book with percentages, Beth relied upon her professional opinion of a student's progress.

> I have a general feel for what I think the individuals are doing. If there is someone that I have a question about, I go back through my records and look at their reading or the work they have done. It is kind of like working to prepare a paper. You do a lot of thinking about it. You have collected all your materials and think about it before you do it.
>
> Beth, Interview 11/21

When a student in Beth's class was asked, "How does your teacher decide what grade you will get?" the student responded, "How we learn." When asked, "How does she know what you learn?" the student responded, "She looks at what we do."

Of all of the teachers we observed, Beth's instructional planning appeared to be the most student-oriented. She consistently made decisions based on her professional assessments of students' strengths and weaknesses. There was also more student choice in her classroom in terms of assignments and timing for completion of tasks.

What We Learned From the Teachers: Patterns of Consensus and Tensions

Although each of the teachers worked within the context of an alternative school, the descriptions above highlight the individual nature of each teacher and classroom. Analysis across cases, however, revealed common issues and tensions concerning assessment and decision making.

Consensus #1: Curricular Decision Making

All four teachers agreed that curriculum decisions were made "on high, right at the top" (Ms. Smith, Interview, November), but that efforts were made by central office personnel to involve teachers in final decisions. "It filters down from a committee set up downtown" (Ms. Young, Interview 10/18). According to the teachers, upper level administrators created preliminary drafts of curricular documents before sending them to representative teachers for comments. Ms. Atwell discussed this organization with an element of relief.

> To be honest with you, I think most people are relieved that they do not have that burden of having to be bothered with too much decision making. I think a lot of people find a lot of comfort in having a lot of things dictated to them. I guess sometimes I find comfort in that, too. It is something else I do not have to work out.
>
> Ms. Atwell, Interview 6/1

The teachers, however, were pleased that the alternative status of their schools provided them with a measure of freedom not found in many other schools in the district; they consistently reported that they were able to view the district's curriculum as a general outline rather than a strict mandate.

> We are all supposed to have a course of study which we follow. It is not easy to follow everything. It is a lot to cover in a year for each individual child. We do the best we can for what we feel is appropriate and what we feel is needed.
>
> Ms. Young, Interview 10/18

Specific decisions regarding the implementation of the curriculum, then, remained within the decision-making capabilities of the individual teacher.

Many of the teachers' decisions were based upon the materials available in the building. As reported previously, materials in Building A were loosely assembled from a variety of sources that often created a mismatch between what the teacher wanted to do and the resources with which she could do it. Consistent building budgets of thousands of dollars for books greatly aided the teachers in School B, however, who made all of the decisions regarding such purchases.

Consensus #2: Within-School Support

The kinds of instructional decisions teachers made during their daily planning were supported by a team approach to schooling. None of the teachers regarded herself as alone, but consistently discussed the helpful roles of the other teachers in the building -- particularly those teachers at their own grade level who were designated as part of their teams. Instructional decisions were based upon the assistance and input of several of their colleagues who eagerly shared both ideas and resources. Thematic plans were greatly enriched by the added resources of several teachers planning together. The building principals were also regarded by the teachers as important parts of their support structure.

> I feel that the principal really supports me and allows me to make my own decisions on what goes on in my classroom and what I am doing.
>
> Ms. Somers, Interview 5/2

The support of both their principal and of their teaching colleagues was a significant factor in the decision-making processes of the teachers in this study. This distinction is further evidenced by Beth who referred to herself as a "worker" in the district -- expected to implement the district curriculum, but a "professional" in the individual school -- empowered with decision-making opportunities within her school and classroom setting.

Tension #1: Classroom Planning and Time for Testing

District-wide testing was regarded by the teachers as a top-level decision over which they had no control. Testing was consistently described as a limitation to their instructional decision making.

> Things that I think limit it [decision making] are [district]-wide testing. That testing tells me some things that I have to spend time on whether I think it is important or not.
>
> Beth, Interview 11/21

Two of the teachers' biggest concerns regarding the tests dealt with the invasiveness of testing on both their classroom time and their out-of-class professional time. Twice a year, students were tested for a week using a battery of tests lasting for one or more hours each day. The tests played havoc with the teachers' daily schedules, and testing was particularly complicated by the cross-age grouping in each classroom. For the duration of the tests, the students had to be regrouped according to a specific grade level so that all students at a given grade level could be tested together. This translated into major changes in the organization of individual classrooms, as some students had to be moved to another classroom with a different teacher during testing. The time factor was also problematic because of the huge amount of record keeping required by the testing procedure. All of the teachers found the reorganization of their classrooms, the time required for the tests, and the time required for paperwork to be intrusions on their daily lives and those of their students. If, perhaps, the teachers had felt that

the test scores provided them with some measure of student progress, the resentment might have been tempered. For the most part, however, the teachers only superficially examined the results of the tests and limited their use of the scores to general information about the entire class rather than using scores to diagnose individual students' needs.

Tension #2: To Prepare or Not to Prepare -- That is the Question

The teachers in this study struggled with another issue related to both testing and time: How much, if any, instructional time should be used to prepare students for testing in hopes of raising their scores? Beth explained her opinion that the tests were not always valid instruments measuring student achievement because "a lot of things you know they understand, but it was the test they did not know how to master" (Beth, Interview 11/21). The dilemma became, then, how much class time should be spent on helping the students become better test takers. The strategies Beth employed included talking with her students about old basal chapter tests so that the students might become familiar with the testing format. She also explored test-taking by using drama with her students, which met with quite favorable responses. Ms. Atwell was particularly concerned about the mismatch between the writing process approach to creative writing used in her room and the testing of discrete skills.

> Taking those basic teaching skills out of context and isolating them and doing end punctuation in one sentence. That is how it arranged in the test. That is how the items are written. It was difficult. We struggle with if we should use materials that help teachers teach kids how to take the test.
>
> Ms. Atwell, Interview 6/1

Tension #3: Documenting Daily Progress

The teachers in this study used a variety of classroom-based assessment tools to document student progress, including coded check lists, note cards, notebooks, conferences, samples of work, projects, and teacher-made tests. The purposes of such documentation appeared two-fold: to assign grades and to make classroom decisions. Tensions arose when classroom-based assessment needed to be translated into grades. Consequently, issues surrounding grading were a significant problem for the teachers in this study.

> How do we monitor? Are we doing enough? Are we evaluating? It is a question that comes up a lot at staff meetings because we do not have a formal way of evaluating. We do some, but yet much of it is informal. It makes a lot of the teachers nervous. Are we sure we are getting the objectives across?
>
> Ms. Somers, Interview 5/2

Grading was particularly difficult for the teachers in School A, who were still required to use the district report card focusing on letter grades. They struggled with ways to translate the informally gathered data into a single letter grade and looked forward to the time when they could develop their own grade card. At School B, a vastly different grade card had been developed by the teaching staff to better reflect the school's philosophy. Traditional letter grades were replaced with O (outstanding), S (satisfactory), and U (unsatisfactory), and used in conjunction with I (independent), P (progressing) and N (not progressing) for each area of the curriculum. Although the parents of students at School B occasionally asked about test scores and letter grades, the teachers discovered that parents were much more interested in knowing that the teacher genuinely cared about their children and knew them well enough to plan appropriate classroom experiences.

> The conferences that are difficult are the ones that don't have the level of trust with you. You have to prove that you care about their child and you know what you are talking about and your values are the same.
>
> Beth, Interview 11/21

What We Learned From the Principals

Interview data from the principals supported the points of consensus and tension discussed above. What emerged from their interviews, however, were their responses to the tensions that led us to characterize them in terms of mediators -- attempting to minimize the pressures of upper level mandates to support the teachers in their building as they created classroom experiences that were consistent with each building's philosophy.

Mediation of Curricular Issues

The principals of both schools agreed with the teachers as they described the district's decision-making process as a top-down model. Administrators for the various content areas determined curriculum decisions. Teachers were not involved in the initial stages of curriculum development, but had some opportunities to respond to drafts written by supervisors with the assistance of university personnel. The resulting curriculum document (graded course of study) was described by Principal A as "your Bible," and by Principal B as "a road map" for teachers to follow.

Both principals stressed the importance of teachers being aware of the contents of the curriculum guide, but also emphasized the implications of decisions made at the classroom level. Principal A pointed out the difference between the curriculum guides and classroom instruction, saying that

> there's still a great deal of latitude for the building principals to pull the staff together to make decisions and put them into use in the actual classroom. I think that's probably more important than the actual document.
>
> Principal A, Interview 4/9

Principal B further emphasized the teacher's role by describing implementation as "the domain of the classroom teacher and the children." He further defined the domain of the teacher as

> what they are going to be studying.... What we need is a teacher in the classroom who is highly involved and a child who is just as involved. What is interesting to them? What are the resources to them? What are the opportunities at hand? What about teachable moments? What about things that are exciting and interesting that you can get together and work on? From there you move over to the skills and the things that are interesting.
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

Principal B clearly made a distinction between the Curriculum with a capital "C" as a document and curriculum with a small "c" that is played out on a daily basis within individual classrooms. The designation of both buildings as alternative schools may have accounted for the absence of discussions concerning the relationship between the curriculum and textbooks. Because both schools employ the use of literature as the main instructional tool for teaching reading, concerns focused more upon evaluation than on what text to use or on the pacing of groups within the basal program.

Mediation of Assessment Issues

Both principals' discussions of assessment centered largely upon the pressures they identified concerning the use of standardized tests. Principal A viewed such testing as inconsistent with the goals of the building and described it as "antithetical to the whole-language approach" but quickly added that "we do have to be mindful of the state requirements." Both principals provided a variety of examples of how they mediate between the pressures of district-wide testing and their individual building philosophies.

At school B, for example, the test scores were viewed in a holistic manner in order to paint a larger picture of the data presented. Rather than examine scores at the level of the individual child or grade level, the staff at School B viewed scores in terms of patterns they have discovered over past years:

> We expect our 2nd grade children not to be as good in their reading scores as those people with the basal readers. The basal reader is just like climbing a ladder. They just go straight up that ladder. We are building out. They are going up the ladder and learning skills. They ought to do well. Our kids are lagging along and we're having a good time and know that we are going to finish in the middle of the pack [at second grade].
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

His "ladder" metaphor continued as he described the scores at the grade 5 level:

> At fifth grade, it is a different story. The city-wide test scores start falling off. The ladder goes up so high and it starts teetering. In fact, kids get up so high and they miss something or they have no data to cling to or they do not have a personal involvement in their reading. They are starting to have problems and the walls start falling down. Our kids are starting to come on. They are hooked into this and they have been choosing literature and things they are interested in. We have caught them on fire...[By fifth grade] our test scores are typically two, three years above the national average.
>
> Principal B, Interview, 10/31

For this principal, viewing test scores in a global manner enabled his staff to avoid overreacting to initial low scores, secure in the belief that their philosophical stance would provide the children in their school with a wider ladder on which to base their learning.

Due to the recency of its designation as an alternative school, School A was unable to view the scores in a similar way. Instead, the principal viewed scores from the first year of operation in terms of pretests and posttests and concluded that

> our test scores from last year, for example, were very high in terms of where the children start. We did a pretest, and then we did posttesting in the spring. We did not gear any lessons or any effort to test-taking or preparing for the test at all and we were just very surprised at the way the test results came out.
>
> Principal A, Interview 4/9

Although each school's interpretation of the scores enabled it to diffuse extensive pressure for program change at the classroom level, each principal openly discussed pressures from above within the top-down

model of decision making they both described. Principal B, for example, described central office personnel who view his school as containing "mavericks and outcasts":

> They kind of ignore us in a way. It is kind of like, if we do not pay any attention to them, we will act like they are not there and maybe they will go away.... We will put all the nuts in there together and leave them alone. This is kind of the way it goes. It is really not a bad position to be in.
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

Being ignored by central office personnel, then, frees his staff to focus upon decisions at the classroom level without interference from upper levels.

He provided two important reasons the school is allowed to function with a minimum of pressure from the top. The first reason was the general perceived competence of the students as reflected in not only test scores but also observations of their performance, particularly after the elementary years.

> They are always surprised when our kids are able to do the things they are able to do and that they are so articulate and so equipped with vocabulary. They are stunned that after our kids leave our school they do so well in middle school and high school. It is just like shock after shock after shock. They can sit there and are begrudging to give us credit. It just goes on and on and on. It is kind of ridiculous.
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

Secondly, the principal credits the participation of parents as crucial to the instructional program. During the previous year, for example, a total of 310 parents volunteered at his building. On any given day, between 25 and 30 parents are present in the building, providing assistance to teachers and students in a variety of ways. Principal B cites such involvement as crucial for the continued progress of the school.

> I am more concerned about my parents being satisfied with the job we are doing here and the parents seeing that their children are learning and growing. I would depend on the parents here making a stand for the school to ensure that this type of learning goes on. The day that parent support for this program is gone, the program is gone. There will be no support at the central office.
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

When parents of preschoolers come to find out about his school and ask him about test scores, Principal B explains his philosophy of testing like this:

> I say, do you know anything about what your child can do? They say, like what? I say, tell me. What do you know? Well, he likes to sing and likes to make things. Can he solve problems? Sure. How about his vocabulary? He has a good vocabulary. Well, what about reading, can he read? What do you mean? If he came to a stop sign would he know what that means? Yea. Well, have you tested him or how do you know that he knows all of that? Did you give him a test with paper and pencil? They say, well, no. Then they start looking at me. I say, well, if you have not given them a test, then how do you know? Well, my observations. I look at them. Am I making you

> angry? Yes, I am getting angry. I say, well, we get angry when people say that the only way you are going to know what a child knows is by a test. I say that any good teacher will tell you more than any standardized test and probably be more accurate.
>
> Principal B, Interview 10/31

Different pressures were described by Principal A, whose history of success is not as long as that of Principal B. For her, the pressures of the immediate supervisor at the conventional school she served 2 years ago remained fresh in her mind. She described specific instances of powerful pressure to "get in there and start some structure, some kind of program to get those scores up." Although she perceived that the alternative school status somewhat insulated the school from mandates from superiors, she freely acknowledged the "differences in schools based on who the area director is and who the immediate supervisor is for your particular program."

The growing pains evident in her emerging school were reflected not only in the overall hierarchy of the school organization, but in terms of recruiting students. Until the philosophy and reputation of the building fully develops and matures, much energy will be spent convincing parents that their children should attend her school.

> We don't have a built-in population; we have to compete. We have to demonstrate that we are going to produce in order to get parents to send their children here. So it's a bit of pressure in the sense that we've got to constantly show that we are doing what we say we are going to do. And then, we are developing on the level that I call the "pizzaz" level. We've got to market....
>
> Principal A, Interview 4/9

The role of parents, then, is crucial for the survival of both schools. The principal serves as a salesperson, constantly communicating the value of the school's philosophy to parents as they decide initially whether or not to send their child to that school, and later, as the parents determine the level of involvement they desire as a volunteer.

What We Learned from the Assistant Superintendent

In her interview, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction echoed the tensions and concerns expressed by the teachers and principals. For instance, she spoke of the "pressures" associated with mediating between public accountability and knowledge of how students learn:

> We have always had a feeling that we weren't doing as well as we should in comparison to the suburban districts around us.... Some of the other influences are what we know about how children learn...But we've got to measure what's happening to the children so we can give the public some information....We are constantly trying to mediate between the pressures.
>
> Asst. Superintendent, Interview 9/8

From her perspective, testing and accountability necessarily put teachers in the position of teaching to the test:

> When they say they are going to publish the way our youngsters are doing compared to others, then it immediately says to the school system, we'd better get busy to see what this test is like and be sure to teach it.

She also talked about the problems associated with "empowering" teachers, specifically in the context of increasing testing:

> And it's one thing to say you have decision-making power and at the same time you impose a nine-week [mastery] test. How do you figure that out? What does it mean to have the power to determine curricula?

Conclusions

The relationship between assessment and instruction in this district shares some similarities with the sites of the larger study, but also represents a unique case. Like two of the sites of the larger study, standardized testing plays a powerful role in the district at large, yet the schools we studied were somewhat sheltered from that effect due to their status as "alternative" or magnet schools. In these schools, the principals and staff have more freedom to choose their own colleagues and formulate their own instructional practices. In this way, they mirror the other two sites in the larger study that rely more on classroom-based assessment to inform instruction.

Even though these schools form special cases, "oases" in a large urban district, the teachers, students, parents, and administrators face fairly universal tensions relative to issues of assessment, decision making, and instruction. These tensions include the conflict between teachers' goals and the goals put forth by the administration; the tension between public accountability and the needs of individual students; and tensions between curriculum with a capital "C" -- the district's written course of study, and curriculum with a small "c" -- curriculum as it is played out moment by moment in classrooms.

It became apparent during our study that the consistent response to tensions and concerns took the form of constant negotiation and mediation at every level: the superintendent endeavored both to be accountable to the public and to develop appropriate measures for student learning; principal B viewed test scores in a global manner to deflect undue pressure on various grade levels; individual teachers made classroom decisions based upon the needs and interests of their students; and parents selected and supported the philosophy and practices of these alternative schools.

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APPENDIX

Superintendent

I would like to ask you a number of questions regarding the role of assessment and the decision-making process in your district. Of course, your comments will be considered confidential and we will not identify your opinions by name or school district.

1. Please give me a picture of the decision-making process in your district.

    a. Please give me a hypothetical situation so I can better understand how this works.

    b. Make sure you know the types of decisions the superintendent makes and those he or she considers the responsibility of principals, teachers, school board members, or other personnel.)

2. What kinds of decisions do you expect teachers to make?

    a. Is there anything done or expected that extends or limits this decision-making? or

    Is there anything done or expected by the administration that extends or limits this decision making?

    b. What is the general policy about curriculum? Who formulates it? What effect does this policy have on classroom decision making?

    c. Who chooses the materials that are used in the classroom? How and to what degree do you expect those materials to influence decision making in the classroom?

    d. What do you think the relationship should be between tests, materials selection, instructional strategies, and instructional decisions?

3. How is student progress monitored in your district?

    a. Do you expect this to be the same from building to building?

    b. What sort of formal and informal assessment takes place? Is this similar from building to building?

    c. How are the data used?

4. How do you think people in your district feel about the decision-making process? The assessment process?

    a. What do you think are the prospects for change in either of these areas?

Principal

I would like to ask you a number of questions regarding the role of assessment and the decision-making process in your district. Of course, your comments will be considered confidential, and we will not identify your opinions by name or school district.

1. Please give me a picture of the decision-making process in your district.

    a. Please give me a hypothetical situation so I can better understand how this works.

    b. (Make sure you know the types of decisions he or she feels are made by outside people and those over which he or she has control.

2. What kinds of decisions do you expect teachers to make?

    a. Is there anything done or expected that extends or limits this decision-making? or

    Is there anything done or expected by the administration that extends or limits this decision making?

    b. What is the general policy about curriculum? Who formulates it? What effect does this policy have on classroom decision making?

    c. Who chooses the materials that are used in the classroom? How and to what degree do you expect those materials to influence decision making in the classroom?

    d. What is the relationship between tests, material selection, instructional strategies and instructional decisions? What do you think the relationship should be?

3. How is student progress monitored in your building?

    a. Do you expect this to be the same from teacher to teacher?

    b. What sort of formal and informal assessment takes place? Is this similar from building to building?

    c. How do you use test data?

    d. How does your monitoring of student progress, assessment, and data usage compare to other buildings?

4. How do you think people in your building feel about the decision-making process? The assessment process?

    a. What do you think are the prospects for change in either of these areas?

Teacher

I would like to ask you a number of questions regarding the role of assessment and the decision-making process in your district. Of course, your comments will be considered confidential, and we will not identify your opinions by name or school district.

1. Please give me a picture of the decision-making process in your district.

    a. Please give me a hypothetical situation so I can better understand how this works.

2. What kinds of decisions do you make as a teacher?

    a. Is there anything done or expected that extends or limits this decision making?

    b. What is the general policy about curriculum? Who formulates it? What effect does this policy have on classroom decision-making?

    c. Who chooses the materials that are used in the classroom? How and to what degree do you expect those materials to influence decision-making in the classroom?

    d. What is the relationship between tests, material selection, instructional strategies, and instruction decisions?

3. How is student progress monitored in your classroom?

    a. What sort of formal and informal assessment takes place? Is this similar from building to building?

    b. How are the data used?

    c. How does your monitoring of students' progress, assessment, and data usage compare to that of other teachers?

4. How do you think people in your district feel about the decision-making process? The assessment process?

    a. What do you think are the prospects for change in either of these areas?

Parent

I would like to ask you a number of questions regarding the role of assessment and the decision-making process in your school district. Of course, your comments will be considered confidential, and we will not identify your opinions by name or school district.

1. Please give me a picture of the decision-making process in your district.

    a. Please give me a hypothetical situation so I can better understand how this works.

2. What kinds of decisions do you expect teachers to make?

    a. Is there anything done or expected that extends or limits this decision making?

    b. What is the general policy about curriculum? Who formulates it? What effect does this policy have on classroom decision-making?

    c. Who chooses the materials that are used in the classroom? How and to what degree do you expect those materials to influence decision making in the classroom?

    d. What is the relationship between tests, material selection, instructional strategies, and instructional decisions? What do you think the relationship should be?

3. How is student progress monitored in your child's building?

    a. Has this been the same from teacher to teacher?

    b. What sort of formal and informal assessment takes place? Is this similar from building to building?

    c. What do you know about the use of test data in your child's school?

    d. How does the monitoring of student progress, assessment, and data usage compare as your child has progressed in school?

4. How do you think people in your district feel about the decision-making process? The assessment process?

    a. What do you think are the prospects for change in either of these areas?

Students

I would like to ask you a number of questions about your school and classroom. Of course, what you say will be between just the two of us.

1. What kinds of decisions have you made lately?

2. What kinds of decisions have you made in school lately?

3. What kinds of decisions has your teacher made?

4. How does your teacher decide what grade you should get? and/or

   How does your teacher decide what to talk to your parents about when they have a conference?

5. Do you take tests? What kinds of tests do you take? How do you feel about them?

6. What do you feel about how decisions are made in your class? If there was one thing you could change, what would it be?