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## The Dangerous Necessity of Assessment: A Teacher's Dilemma

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During my first year of teaching, Lily was a confident and verbal first grader in my first and second grade class. She wrote a story about a dragon the first week of school and easily sounded out every word. She held her own with the older children in the class. The trouble began when I administered the first "spelling" assessment of the year. I didn't call it an assessment. I didn't call it anything, for that matter. I told the kids I was going to go over their spelling and, unlike with most of our activities, I wanted them to work independently. I told them that I only wanted to see how they were doing and they didn't have to worry. I read the words as kindly as possible. I tried not to be too scary when I asked kids to move to a separate desk if they seemed to be looking on with someone else. Midway through the assessment, Lily put her head down and started to sob. I was new. It was my first formal assessment. I had no idea what to do. I told everyone to disregard Lily. I told her it was okay and not to worry. I continued droning on, and I then pretended nothing had happened.

The next upset came with first grader Sebastian. Quick Sebastian. Verbal Sebastian. Inventive Sebastian. Sebastian who could craft all kinds of stories and write poems that still run through my head. Sebastian who compared the ways that time passes in *Where the Wild Things Are* to *Wrinkle in Time* on the first day of first grade. Sebastian who remembered every book I ever read. I read the oral portion of the city-wide assessment aloud. I said to write everything you remembered. Sebastian started to shake. "I can't. I can't remember anything." I was horrified. Everyone was uneasy, and I was annoyed because he was the only kid who I was sure would succeed on this task. "You can, come on. Just write about the story."

"I can't." Sebastian started to sob. I lost my temper. "Come on, you can. Just try. You need to try to remember." I released him to go to the bathroom so he could calm down and I could continue the assessment. A few minutes later the principal showed up in my room with a sobbing small child. "He's fine," I muttered. "He says that you said he had to write," The principal replied. I panicked. "He didn't have to write. It's just that he knew it and he . . . Sebastian, you could do it." After a lecture on not pushing small children too hard, the principal forgave me. Sebastian forgave me. After school, I told his parents about how he froze up and cried. They ultimately forgave me too.

Neither Lily nor Sebastian had the same breakdown again. In fact, the next year, they consoled the first graders through their first assessments. Yet, I learned from them. I coach the assessments better now. "It's not about testing you. It's about me seeing what I've taught you. I'm testing myself, really." I watch kids to see if they need to stop and put their heads down. Sometimes, I send kids out during the assessment if I know it will be too stressful or frustrating for them. I have learned these things, and I tell this story because, for me, any discussion of assessments, despite their crucial importance in teaching, must begin with the sense of danger and judgment that looms over them in the education world and, contrary to my efforts, in my classroom.

As a first and second grade teacher at a public, progressive, East Village school, the word assessment is a daily part of my life. Formally, twice a year, I write narrative reports that describe my students in detail as well as assess specific skill development. Three times a year, I administer the Teachers College Literacy Assessment for my principal and literacy coach. I also do these assessments to inform my own teaching every few months. At the end of each unit, I administer formal math assessments to students as well as check their growth more individually on a weekly basis. I serve on the Do-Your-Own-Assessment committee at Long Island University where I work with teachers from other schools in my network, to develop and implement the "Descriptive Inquiry Document Sheet" (DYO Sheet) used to describe children's work and identify their next steps. The DYO Sheet is the primary means of assessment at my school. The primary goal

of assessment at my school in and our network is to know students well by using multiple sources to understand them.

To illustrate how this works, I will closely describe assessments done and the teaching that resulted from them during one particular day. After a whole class lesson on reading and responding to story problems, I begin working with Mia on applying her understanding of combinations of 10 to combinations of 20. I have determined she needs help in this area from looking over word problems where she uses pictures when adding numbers greater than 10 and from an oral assessment where she struggled to connect that if  $7 + 3$  is 10 then  $17 + 3$  is 20 and then  $27 + 3$  is 30. These two varied assessments suggest that not only does she struggle with higher numbers, but also she needs more work on place value to see that numbers are identical except larger by 10. Two years of experience with Mia have shown me that she struggles to memorize math facts and new words, so I focus on strategies that rely almost exclusively on comprehension, not memorization. I tell Mia all this information, explaining to her that she will do some problems working with base-10 blocks, and I want her to look for patterns. It is important that she hears the connections between her confusion and the lessons she receives so that she can learn based on her own strengths and limitations as opposed to a series of random activities. Further, by solving the problem with materials that help her to break the numbers into 10s, she will ultimately be able to see and verbalize the patterns needed to understand adding 10s quickly.

Next, I begin writing workshop with storytelling. Students are instructed to tell a "just-so-story," a type of story we have been reading as a class in which myth is used to explain a natural phenomenon such as how the sun came to be. Students raise their hand to share a story. This helps their ideas flow and allows kids to learn story structure from each other. I focus on myths and oral story-telling because my students often have great ideas for stories but have trouble following them through to a clear and coherent end. Hearing and questioning each other's stories helps them develop plot, as well. I began using this strategy after I noticed a major gap between what children could articulate and then get on paper. I found that stories improved when children had the opportunity to express them verbally first.

I then dismiss the students to write independently. Having looked over students' writing the night before, I know which children I want to meet with individually. Heidi is struggling with spelling despite her success during word study activities. While she understands the concept of long vowel sounds, she still is confusing short vowel sounds regularly. She is also using incorrect formations for long vowel sounds, relying on "ea" for every long e sound. During writing workshop, I have Heidi take a break to do "sorts." She is given a collection of long e words and a sheet with headings such as "ee," "ea" "y." She then matches her words to each category. Heidi's writing is strong but her spelling is starting to interfere with its readability. Because in many cases, she has some understanding of sounds, but is struggling with incorrect formations (ea when it should be ee etc.), Heidi sifts through books to find spelling patterns during word study instead of relying exclusively on sorts. She also keeps a spelling journal for reference. This combination of sorts and keeping track of new words helps spelling patterns to become more automatic. Building her sorts on the struggles I see during her writing, and explaining this to her, makes the activity more meaningful because it is directly connected to writing.

Alana is writing in complete sentences but isn't adding punctuation. Many of my students are at this stage, so I plan a mini-unit on punctuation. Because the children seem to be having trouble hearing where the periods go and are adding periods in places that seem random, I build the lesson around listening to sentences. I give them paper with a familiar story typed out without the periods so that they already understand the meaning. When they hear a period I ask that they indicate by pounding one fist on top of the other. Then I read the book with exaggerated pauses. Between my oral cues and their classmate's visual illustration, I hope that they will not only hear the periods in my voice but also notice them from other children. The pounding emphasizes the stop and particularly helps students like Jason, who always use their hands to speak in class discussion.

For reading, I listen to them read and also watch their behavior. Lars is a fluent reader but often does not read when asked (a fact confirmed by his mother). He is very engaged during our shorter partner reading periods. He takes partner work very seriously and is happiest when working with other people. Our conferences and his participation in read-alouds suggest fluency. To develop stamina and further reading

enjoyment, I assign him to partner-read a chapter book with a classmate with similar struggles and strengths. Within a week, reading together, they are able to complete the book.

Assessment means watching and knowing the children in all areas. It is figuring out, as effectively as possible, how their minds and personalities work. It's knowing the students that do better with other people and those that are more productive on their own. It's knowing who leans towards memorization and picks up facts quickly and who has high comprehension but may learn the skills more slowly. In trying to understand my students, assessment means keeping my eyes open at every moment of the day, drawing from enough sources and knowing students well enough that when one lesson doesn't work (as is often the case), I am prepared to figure out a new angle.

Though I have found a place in my teaching for assessment to be meaningful and productive, a place from which I can describe every student as gifted because I see and understand the areas in which they are, assessment still looms over us. Lily and Sebastian are now in third grade. I have not had a child cry during assessments for two years. Nevertheless, it seems that the pain and fear that led to those breakdowns has not disappeared. It emerges more subtly now.

For example, this fall, a murmur of horror spread through my classroom after I had given three second-graders the "third-grade spelling" book. Two second-graders, Alex and Jose, were particularly alarmed. I called a whole class meeting to openly acknowledge that after reviewing students' spelling assessments, I had assigned not only differentiated books but also different lessons within the books. I frankly told them that yes, some kids did know more spelling patterns than others and that this was neither a big deal nor a sign of intelligence. Instead of pretending everyone was good at everything, we would highlight what everyone was actually good at. We went around the circle and each kid was to point out another "classmate's special talent." I was impressed—every child received honest and thoughtful comments such as, "Nicky always shares his toys once he's finished with them," and "Alex has the most interesting ideas of what to do. He has the best imagination." Everyone looked happy and there seemed to be a warm friendly vibe as the children left the meeting area to get their coats and backpacks for dismissal.

I was feeling confident and happy about the day until Alex approached me again, saying, "It's just that, it's just that I feel sad about my talent."

"Why?" I asked, befuddled.

"Well, it's not a useful one like spelling. Mine is the most useless one of all. I mean, what good does anyone have for imagination?"

"Oh no, Alex" I exclaimed, "Yours, yours, that's a good one. I mean everyone's going to learn how to spell but an imagination, now that doesn't come easy. That one will really help you out in life." He wandered away half-smiling but didn't seem to fully believe me.

I was left heartbroken. Here was a child with a great and useful skill feeling worthless. Furthermore, and more significantly, here was a child whose special skill didn't feel like enough to him. I worried: in my response to him, that his talent was particularly special, was I also undermining all the other talents in the class and suggesting that some may be better than others? This highlights for me the continued tension I feel around assessment: it is crucial in understanding, valuing, and teaching my students. Every decision I make each, every moment of the day—from how long we stay in the morning meeting to the afternoon book we read together—comes from some form of assessment. In its many forms, assessment is absolutely essential to successful teaching. And yet, the underlying messages of success and failure are dangerous and deeply connected to even the most well-intentioned assessments.

The students in my class go through cycles. Often they seem happy, confident in their abilities, able to recognize various strengths in themselves and others. Yet it seems that whenever I feel confident that we've truly made progress, something happens that shows me how deeply the underlying concern about assessment is imbedded in them, and in me. This ranges from individual feelings of failure after struggling to master an easily assessed skill like spelling to a general consensus that a certain child is the "smartest" in

the class. I keep struggling to make my class a safe and honest environment, to make it a place where my assessments are clear to kids and parents, where we value children's progression and movement, and not only their abilities. I have no definitive answers. All I have is the underlying sense that at its core, assessment must be about looking for ways to help children learn more by about finding the ways and places in which they shine.

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