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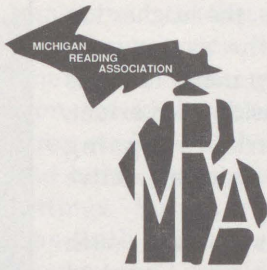
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Professionalism and Assessment

by Robert L. Smith

Because the meaning of "profession" is still emerging, educators need to be aware of what attributes and attitudes will help teaching be universally regarded as something more than a trade. In 1989 a task force for the Association of Colleges and Schools of Education in State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and Affiliated Private Universities concluded that teaching's move toward professionalism relies on two factors. First, there must be "extensive specialized knowledge" -- derived from research and experimentation, from intensive scholarship, and from the **accumulated wisdom of practice** -- which sustains and improves the practice. Second, there must be a "unique core set of values" which governs our behaviors and practices. One important part of the specialized knowledge of our field, which naturally interfaces with our values, is assessment.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1989) states that part of being committed to students and their learning means that teachers must "adjust their practice as appropriate, based on observation and knowledge of their students' interests, abilities, skills, knowledge, family circumstances, and peer relationships." Such professional flexibility depends upon accurate assessment. The International Reading Association

(IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (1989) have concurred that:

We learn about our students over time by mentally and physically keeping track of their learning as we interact with them in the classroom. The assessment tool kit must be expanded to include more exemplars of contextualized assessment strategies--those indicators of learning that are gathered as an integral part of the teaching/learning situation.

Clearly, such classroom assessment is one of the major professional challenges for educators.

By noticing how other professions conduct assessment, teachers can approach the educational assessment challenge. Social workers are a notable example of another emerging profession which relies on assessment of clients. From an assessment standpoint, social workers may be doing a better job than educators at presenting to the public a case for being deserving of professional status.

When social workers assess clients, they use a firm knowledge base -- they read books and journals regularly, consult with each other frequently and generally collect and interpret the multiple meanings of professional experiences. Most of their diagnosis is done on the basis of

informal observations occurring over time. They listen and probe and think and keep records of everything. If more formal testing is needed, they arrange it.

After formal assessment has been conducted, social workers don't hide behind a Wizard of Oz screen of testing technology. Instead, they take responsibility for decisions about interventions based on both their formal and informal data -- always remembering that the data is incomplete even when both types are available. As psychologist Sheldon Kopp (1975) has stated, "All important decisions must be made on the basis of insufficient data. Yet we are responsible for everything we do."

Part of responsible professionalism, then, consists of balancing formal and informal assessment. Perhaps some educators have tried to emphasize the scientific credibility of formal assessment and to de-emphasize the subjective judgments of informal classroom assessment in order to promote our profession. If so, this strategy has backfired: formal assessment has begun to control how we teach! The imbalance we have created has taken away too much of our authority -- our observations, intuition and professional judgment. As International Reading Association President Carl Braun (1990) put it, "The test, even one of the worst sort, overrides professional judgment of teachers." Livingston, Castle and Nations (1989) agree with Braun that "deprofessionalization of teaching occurs when teacher judgment and yearlong documentation of student progress can be invalidated by a single test score." Sheila Valencia and P. David Pearson (1987) state the case even more strongly: "In an attempt to objectify and routinize the way data is collected and

used to make decisions, the teacher has been forced out of the assessment process." Consequently, many teachers have become, to a considerable extent, classroom managers assigning repetitive tasks rather than interactive facilitators of learning.

The problem associated with scientific measurement was described well by psychiatrist M. Scott Peck (1978) in **The Road Less Traveled**:

In its laudable insistence upon experience, accurate observation and verifiability, science has placed great emphasis upon measurement. To measure something is to experience it in a certain dimension, a dimension in which we can make observations of great accuracy which are repeatable by others. The use of measurement has enabled science to make enormous strides in the understanding of the material universe. But by virtue of its success, measurement has become a kind of scientific idol. The result is an attitude on the part of many scientists of not only skepticism but outright rejection of what cannot be measured. It is as if they were to say, "What we cannot measure, we cannot know; there is no point in worrying about what we cannot know; therefore, what cannot be measured is unimportant and unworthy of our observation."

This scientific rejection of the unmeasurable spills out into the field of reading education. Thus, the kinds of literate behaviors which "count" as student achievement are severely limited to our standardized, scientific measures.

In the spring of 1990, the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy issued a strong appeal for

transforming testing in America. In the commission's view, there is a need for "the use of richer, more creative, and more varied devices that provide more direct evidence of the knowledge, skills, and behavior interests in real-world settings." Such a transformation is in line with what the IRA and NCTE desire and would likely involve assessment of actual student performances and projects -- a process which must involve the observation and evaluation skills of teachers. But will the public trust teachers' evaluations?

Research helps counter the widespread perception, particularly among other professionals, that teachers are poor judges of their students' attributes. For example, a study by Robert Hoge and Theodore Coladarci (1989) surveyed the empirical literature on the match between teacher-based judgments of student achievement levels and corresponding standardized achievement tests' measures of students' learning. The 16 studies analyzed included methodologies such as examinations of teachers' abilities to predict which items on a standardized test particular students in their classes would be able to answer correctly; on the average, teachers were correct for over 70% of the items. All in all, high levels of validity were found for the various teacher-judgment measures. Nonetheless, the researchers recommended that greater efforts be made to sensitize teachers even further "to the extent and importance of the assessment role in the teaching process."

Teachers and their professional organizations need to take the lead in putting formal assessment back into balance with classroom assessment and apprising communities that **both** types of assessment have their purposes.

Promising examples of leadership include 1) Karen Lunsford's work on the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) **Standards in Reading** (1988), and 2) the collaboration of four professional teacher organizations (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Education Association) to produce **Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students** (1989). These works suggest, among other things, that knowledge is the force which allows us to make changes. While growing in this way necessitates taking risks, dedicating time and, most of all, accepting responsibility for the decisions, the ultimate benefits of self-empowerment, better instructional decisions, higher professional status, and empowered students are well worth the struggle and strain.

The situation is full of hope because teachers have been accomplishing classroom assessment all along, even though the public has not been made aware of it. What was reported in the **BCEL Newspaper for the Business Community** (1990, January) seems as true for school programs as it is for industry's academic programs:

...all around the country, assessment is being carried on quietly and out of the public eye, much of it growing informally from day-to-day practice. No one knows what the accumulated experience adds up to and how it can be used to guide the field. We need mechanisms for collecting and distilling this information.

During the 1990-91 school year, the Michigan Reading Association plans to continue assisting the Michigan

Educational Assessment Program in its four-year quest to collect and distill teacher wisdom about classroom assessment. Two projects, one in Washtenaw County and one in Kent County, will be conducted to that end. Also, to promote the accumulating of ideas, a classroom assessment carousel of ideas will be features of the 1991 and 1992 MRA conferences.

You are encouraged to rethink your assessment strategies and to develop assertive new systems for assessing recording and reporting. Watch for the many articles and books which are emerging on alternative forms of assessment, and try some new approaches. As you feel comfortable with your new systems, gradually seek to "standardize" classroom assessment with others in your building and district. Simultaneously begin to show the public that **"classroom teachers are the best judges of ongoing student progress."**

And remember what Yetta Goodman (1989) has written about being as patient with yourself as you would be with students: developing a knowledge base and a strong professional sense of assessment takes time. Convincing the public that we are as knowledgeable as other professionals will take even longer. Still, we owe it to ourselves and to our students to continue professionalizing our assessment procedures.

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