

SUPPORTING SCHOOL LEADERS IN BALANCING ASSESSMENT

**BALANCING ASSESSMENT:
HOW SCHOOL LEADERS CAN SUPPORT BALANCED ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS IN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

by

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Abstract

This capstone study examined some of the issues surrounding the use of standardized assessment in the province of Alberta. Through an examination of the purpose of both classroom and external assessments, the function of standardized testing is clarified. Additionally, this capstone study explored the positive and negative impacts on educational stakeholders, specifically students and teachers, that accompany the use of standardized assessments. Finally, this capstone study discussed the benefits of a balanced assessments system, clarified the roles and responsibilities of individuals involved in such a system, particularly school leaders, and offered practical suggestions on how to develop assessment literacy and build a balanced assessment system within their schools.

Keywords: balanced assessment, standardized assessment, educational leadership, assessment practices, secondary education

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Balancing Assessment: How Educational Leaders Can Support Balanced Assessment Systems in Secondary Schools

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In the field of education, teachers are required to make daily decisions regarding planning, instruction, and assessment to impact student learning (Hattie et al., 2021). In fact, the *Teacher Quality Standard* requires that teachers demonstrate a professional body of knowledge by “applying a current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction, and assessment practices to meet the learning needs of every student” (Alberta Education, 2018c, p. 5). Ultimately, educators are tasked with ensuring that they adhere to the curricular objectives set forth by the province by tailoring the learning environment to reach each unique student. In contrast, as a measure of accountability, standardized assessment practices are used to “ensure that all school authorities are on the same page, measuring the same factors in the same way at the same time, creating an accurate picture to share with the public” (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 2). The paradox that exists between meeting the needs of each individual student and seeking accountability in a standardized way inevitably raises the question, what is the picture that Alberta Education wishes to share with the public? Further to this, one may wonder if this picture is truly clear to all educational stakeholders, especially those on the front lines.

Background

Alberta Education (2018c) stated that “quality teaching occurs when the teacher’s ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher’s decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply, result in optimum learning for all students” (p. 2). Although the word “assessment” does not directly appear in the statement, it is easy to assume that it is through

assessment teachers are able to make the educational decisions that guide their practice to create those “optimal student learning experiences.” The primary purpose of assessment in education is to improve student learning (Alberta Education, 2021); however, to do this effectively, educators must clearly define and examine current assessment practices.

Black and Wiliam (1998) stated that “formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching” (p. 140). They argued that the function of this type of assessment is to gather evidence of student learning for the purpose of adapting teaching to meet the needs of all students. A crucial element of this type of assessment is that the information is used to make changes (Wiliam, 2006). Timely and targeted feedback is an integral component of formative assessment, as it supports students by providing them with valuable information to assist them in shifting their thinking and behaviours in order to attain the desired outcomes. Often seen as separate in its function to summative assessment, especially external assessments, formative assessment has the potential to significantly impact student achievement overall (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). In contrast, summative assessment practices have traditionally been used to evaluate learning at the end of a unit, to make placement recommendations from grade to grade, to provide accountability data for reaching desired curricular objectives, to earn completion diplomas, or to determine entrance to certain postsecondary institutions or occupations (Centre for Research and Innovation, 2008). In the classroom context, summative assessments are usually seen as a final evaluation in the form of a test, exam, or product (Taras, 2010).

Although both formative and summative assessment practices are used consistently by classroom teachers in schools throughout Alberta, in Grades 6, 9, and 12, these evaluative tools also emerge in the form of high-stakes standardized tests at these levels. These tests are used to

provide educational stakeholders, such as government ministries, school boards, taxpayers, and parents with data that hold school divisions accountable, ensuring that schools are providing students with quality education by meeting certain standards of achievement. According to the Alberta Teachers Association (2005), “Accountability is a necessary feature of public education and indeed, helps to keep the ‘public’ in schooling” (p. 49); however, educators must be aware that these external assessments have the potential to “dominate a teachers’ work” and potentially “lead teachers to act against their own better judgment about the best ways to develop the learning of their pupils” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 147).

For many years, I was responsible for teaching Grades 6 and 9 English language arts. These happened to be provincial achievement test years, and although there was an expectation that the students would achieve at a certain level on these assessments, I never found myself too stressed or worried about the actual assessment. I believe if a teacher adheres to the curricular objectives as laid out by the program of studies, effectively engages students in learning the material by providing them with authentic and meaningful lessons, uses assessment as a tool to measure students’ progress towards those objectives, and adapts their teaching based on the evidence garnered from the assessments, that students naturally do well on these exams. Consistently, the students I taught achieved well above provincial averages. Each year, as our staff worked through analyzing the data, I attributed the student success to the work that had taken place daily in the classroom. Personally, I used the data to look for trends and find areas that I could continue to improve upon myself as a teacher.

Three years later I found myself in a high school, surrounded by educators looking to help students cross the finish line. Stepping into this role, I was aware of the strong mindset that generally exists around diploma examinations. These important assessments support high school

completion requirements and carry a hefty weighting of 30% of a student's final grade. Although I was aware of the pressure these assessments create, I realized that this driving force permeates nearly every aspect of the high school experience. Professional learning has centered around formative assessment for over 3 years at our school, and emphasis has been placed on assessment practices that guide the day-to-day decisions within the classrooms; however, the provincial diploma examinations continue to provide the direction for the planning, instruction, and assessment within the class on a daily basis. Years of accountability talk and the scrutinizing of results to measure teacher success (or failure), to compare schools, and to rank school divisions within the province have contributed to the ongoing emphasis on these tests. In seeking to better understand this thinking, I have had many discussions with colleagues to determine where this mindset has come from. Interestingly, I also sensed a level of fear associated with the results of these assessments, a worry about personal judgment associated with failing to meet the standards.

These observations have ignited my interest in determining how to shift thinking around standardized assessments towards a more holistic, balanced approach to teaching and learning. My hope is that in the future, there will be less emphasis on accountability in terms of the quantitative data garnered from these one-time assessments and more emphasis on the assurance that students are indeed receiving a quality education through various rich, authentic learning experiences and meaningful assessment practices that happen daily within the classroom to support learning.

Assessment is a complex component of education, and although having a clear and transparent understanding of the purpose that each assessment practice serves is important, Taras (2010) warned that “the consequences of losing sight of the process of assessment are very

serious” (p. 126). Without a clear recognition of various assessment processes and the complementary functions, there is potential for perceptions to become distorted and assessment to be misused and feared by educators (Taras, 2008). Dixson and Worrell (2016) stated that “in the current age of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability ... teachers continue to be under enormous pressure to get their students to achieve” (p. 153). They argued that the overwhelming emphasis on informal, low-stakes formative assessment practices as a means to prepare for more formal, high-stakes evaluations has led to an overreliance and skewed understanding of assessment in general. This and the current landscape of assurance and accountability have resulted in a system that is unclear about the functions and, more importantly, the processes of educational assessment practices.

Statement of the Problem

Aitken et al. (2011) investigated the current state of assessment in Alberta and discovered multiple areas of concern. They argued that “external assessments, such as PATs [provincial achievement tests], may exacerbate the view that assessment is one of the most disliked and resisted components of teaching” (Aitken et al., 2011, p. 194). Herein lies the problem: the “failure to balance our use of standardized tests and classroom assessments in the service of school improvement” (Stiggins, 2002, p. 758) has created a distorted perception of the goal of assessment in education. Although the data collected from annual standardized assessments support governments and policy makers to make decisions that impact the broadest range of classrooms and students (Stiggins, 2002), teachers’ general lack of understanding and misperceptions regarding the “purpose of these assessments has a direct negative impact on their teaching practice and assessment attitudes” (Aitken et al., 2011, p. 195).

There is a strong emotional element attached to assessment practices in education (Aitken et al., 2011), stemming largely from educator experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. Common misconceptions associated with assessment include “employer use of data, perceived lack of confidence in teachers’ abilities to assess well, impact of school rankings published by organizations, and other stakeholders’ agendas and perspectives” (Aitken et al., 2011, p. 198). With reported high levels of mistrust in educational institutions, the inevitable impacts on teaching and learning are significant. This is why it is imperative to support educators in clarifying the purpose and process of various assessment practices that shape education today and to diligently work on improving communication amongst all educational stakeholders in order to develop an “ethical and equitable assessment [system] which is acceptable to all concerned” (Taras, 2010, p. 128).

Assessment practices should invite students into the process of learning by building their confidence, encouraging risk-taking, and helping them “come to understand what it means to be in charge of their own learning” (Stiggins, 2002, p. 764). By shifting the mindsets of teachers surrounding the importance and preparation for these perceived high-stakes, external standardized assessments, especially at the high school level, educational leaders can effectively and intentionally enable teachers to support all students, especially those who are considered at-risk, to experience more success on their educational journeys. Through a balanced approach to assessment and a stronger emphasis on what happens within the classroom on a daily basis, student achievement measures will continue to improve on these external, standardized measures (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). Educators owe it to students to ensure that instructional and assessment practices are in their best academic, social, and

emotional interests; they need to demonstrate the belief that all students can succeed by continually striving to improve their own knowledge, skills and attitudes pertaining to their craft.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this capstone study is to clarify the history, function, and process of various assessment practices, particularly standardized assessment practices, to gain a clear understanding of the role they play in improving student achievement. Additionally, the research explores the positive and negative implications of standardized assessment practices on both teachers and students in the pursuit of providing quality teaching and learning experiences. Finally, the study offers educational leaders practical strategies to support the creation of a more balanced assessment system that focuses on building authentic and meaningful teaching and learning practices in their schools. Standardization is a vast and extremely complex issue that is rooted in how our entire society is organized, and the key understandings explored in this capstone study can act as starting points for further research and conversations about how to impact change pertaining to assessment practices in education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this capstone study is to address the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of standardized assessment in Alberta?
2. What are the impacts of standardized assessment practices in secondary education?
3. How can educational leaders support the creation of balanced assessment systems in Alberta schools?

Significance of the Study

Assessment will forever be an integral part of how stakeholders measure learning as it “provides the evidence of success on the part of students, teachers and the system” (Stiggins,

2002, p. 759). Due to the public nature of education in Alberta, accountability and assurance must indicate that students are indeed receiving quality education and meeting the standards set forth by the government. However, the purpose of education has shifted significantly since its conception and measures of achievement must keep pace with these changes. To meet the diverse needs of all learners, teachers cannot simply “teach, test, hope for the best, assign a grade, and move on to the next unit” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 139), as assessment practices no longer exist to just sort students into various social and economic classes (Stiggins, 2017; see also DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Today, educators must employ an array of assessment strategies to meet the unique learning needs of each individual student (Alberta Education, 2018c), a process that is focused on growth and development for all learners.

In the pursuit of balance in regard to summative assessments *of* learning and the day-to-day formative assessments *for* learning, educators stand to set the current system of education up for “unprecedented gains in achievement” (Stiggins, 2002, p. 761). For all stakeholders to benefit, there is a “critical need for better relationships and more effective communication” (Aitken et al., 2011, p. 205) amongst all who have an invested interest in the academic success of our students. In conjunction with improved relationships, “a balanced approach to testing will support the multiple functions of classroom assessment and provide appropriate feedback to students, parents, and policy makers” (Aitken et al., 2011, p. 196).

When teachers effectively balance their use of assessment, students are motivated to learn, and important instructional decisions are informed by accurate information. As they experience success, students gain confidence in their abilities and learn to take academic risks in order to continue to grow. Their sense of agency over their educational journey increases and contributes to the foundation of lifelong learning the system aims to instill in students. Parents

are actively invited into the learning process as they witness their children excited about learning and achieving. Finally, school administrators, school boards, and government agencies continue to meet accountability standards, ensuring quality education is being provided to students in the province (Stiggins, 2002).

Scope of Study

This capstone study examined research concerning the history and purpose of various assessment practices and accountability measures; highlighted the benefits and unintended consequences of standardization as they pertain to educational stakeholders, particularly teachers and students; and explored relevant strategies educational leaders can implement to create a balanced approach to assessment practices in their schools. A review of the literature indicated that by addressing concerns surrounding current assessment functions and seeking a balance between classroom processes and the accountability measures, educators could significantly impact student achievement.

Summary

“Assessment vies with learning for supremacy at the heart of the educational experience” (Taras, 2008, p. 172). To support students in achieving their learning goals, educators must be clear of the intended function and, more importantly, process that each assessment practice serves and work to seamlessly connect these practices to their daily instruction in the classroom. Lack of clarity regarding assessment has the potential to create negative perceptions which inevitably impact instructional behaviours (Aitken et al., 2011). Chapter 1 of this capstone study outlined the need for educational leaders to clarify the purpose and processes of forms of assessment, specifically standardized practices, in order to adequately improve student achievement. By addressing the history of external accountability measures, clarifying their

purpose and process in our current educational landscape, and exploring the impacts on both teachers and students, educational leaders will have a more holistic view of how to build a balanced system by shifting teacher perceptions and behaviours surrounding assessment. This will inevitably impact the ways in which students learn and achieve in our province.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

This capstone study is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 presents background and addresses issues regarding standardized assessment practices in education. Chapter 2 serves as an extensive review of the literature to describe the history and purpose of standardized assessment; the impacts such practices have on students, teachers, and other educational stakeholders; and the process of creating a balanced assessment system that meets the needs of all. Chapter 3 offers recommendations on specific strategies that educational leaders can use to support teachers in clarifying their understanding of assessment practices in the pursuit of creating a balanced assessment system that best supports students' learning and achievement.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In 2030, if Alberta is to truly foster learning excellence, there will be no “one-size-fits-all” approach. What is taught, how it is taught, and how the community is engaged will reflect what is valuable to the community. Similarly, accountability processes will reflect the appropriate degree of complexity and formality required by teachers, governors, leaders, managers, and funders. (Alberta Education, 2010c, pp. 36–37)

Introduction

In a world of increasing accountability under the careful watch of the public eye, the mission of assessment in education has shifted (Stiggins, 2017). A system designed to support the broader social and economic workings of society by sorting and ranking students has become an institution destined to support the achievement and success of all learners. Despite this shift, to demonstrate transparent measures of student achievement, “standardized testing remains hegemonic in [American] public education” (Starr, 2021, p. 58), giving governments and policymakers the ability to use results to make decisions that impact those within the education system. School authorities must answer to the government and thus have a responsibility to hold schools, and the administrators who operate them, to a high standard of excellence. School leaders are tasked with ensuring that all students within their buildings receive quality education under the direction of qualified and innovative teachers. Additionally, the dynamics of these classrooms have also shifted to be more inclusive to students with a wide range of learning needs and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, the landscape of education is diverse and complex, and will likely continue to be carefully monitored by those in power. Instead of resisting this control, educators are encouraged to seek common ground and work together to build a balanced system

where all stakeholders use assessment information appropriately, being clear on “why and how the information is relevant to their work” (Centre for Research and Innovation, 2008, p. 4).

The topic of educational assessment is not new. One does not have to search too long or hard to find copious amounts of research on every facet of this integral part of the education system. Unfortunately, the historical shifts between classroom assessment and external, standardized assessment and the increased need for public accountability have created a culture for “debates [to] thrive on binary choices” (Starr, 2021, p. 58). Black (1998) warned, “To give priority to one is to reduce a system’s capacity to serve the other” (p. 34). To adequately serve the students in Alberta schools, educators must first clarify the purpose of standardized assessment and recognize the place it holds within the current educational framework.

In a study of educational assessment theory, policies, and practices in Alberta, Aitken et al. (2011) found “an issue that permeated all levels [of the study] was a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose of student assessment and data collection uses” (p. 2). For balanced assessment systems to exist, educators must first develop a strong foundation of assessment literacy for all those who use, interpret, analyze, and make decisions based on the results assessments provide (Guskey, 2020). This chapter provides clarity around the purpose of assessment, especially standardized assessment, to identify both the positive and negative impacts that these external assessment practices have on various stakeholders, particularly students and teachers, and highlight the school leader’s role in constructing a balanced assessment system within their schools.

Definition of Terms

Accountability:

To be responsible, to be answerable, to be blameworthy, or even to be liable. The literal meaning of the term—that of being “held to account”—suggests there is an expectation that when a person, organization, or entity is accountable, they can be expected or required to render an account of their action (or inaction). (Wiliam, 2010, p. 108)

Assessment: “The process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform educational decisions” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 5).

Assessment literacy: “An individual’s understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions” (Popham, 2018, p. 2).

Balanced assessment system: A system that “satisfies the information needs of all assessment users at the classroom, building and district levels” (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 13).

Balancing assessment: The active process of continuous improvement regarding educational assessment practices.

Educational leaders: Anyone who fulfills a leadership role within an educational context, such as principals, vice-principals, department heads, and teacher leaders.

Educational leadership: The distribution of leadership within an educational organization on the “basis of expertise, ideas, and personality or character” (Robinson, 2011, p. 8).

Formative assessment: “Frequent and ongoing ways to check students’ progress toward mastery; the most useful assessment teachers can provide for students for their own teaching decisions” (Wormeli, 2018, p. 284).

High-stakes assessment: “Assessment with important consequences for test takers, on the basis of their performance” (UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning, n.d., para. 1).

School authority: “School boards, charter schools, accredited funded private schools” (Alberta Education, 2022a, p. 16).

Stakeholders: Those who have a vested interest in the achievement of students and the education system. This could be students, teachers, administrators, parents, school authorities, policymakers, government leaders, taxpayers, employers, etc.

Standardized assessment: “Norm-referenced or criterion-referenced tests mandated by the state [province] where the aggregated results are used for summative purposes such as judging the effectiveness of the programs of schools” (Burger & Krueger, 2003, p. 2).

Summative assessment: “Completed after the learning experiences; usually requires students to demonstrate mastery of all essential understandings, though they can be explored over several different tasks; gradable” (Wormeli, 2018, p. 284).

Background Information

To better understand how to improve assessment in education, it is imperative to gain insight into the historical development of such evaluative practices in relation to education and the broader social circumstances (Black, 1998). A detailed account of the history of assessment in Alberta education is beyond the scope of this capstone study; however, a brief overview of the driving forces that have laid the foundation for the system which currently exists is relevant to one’s understanding. Black (1998) laid this foundation by examining testing and how it came to be in China, England, and the United States (which serves as Canada’s closest comparison). He stated that it was “important to see any account of assessment as a snapshot, one frame of a record which moves on, perhaps slowly, perhaps quickly, according to the impact of a variety of pressures” (Black, 1998, p. 7).

Originating in the 19th century, assessment in China originally took the form of written tests as a mode of entry into the civil service. Likewise, assessments in England also provided citizens with a formal way of entrance into universities and professions by acting as a

“gatekeeper” in dealing with social inequalities of informal access to school and work, often through patronage, friends, family, and social class. Eventually, examinations evolved into a method used to raise the standards of achievement by motivating students to work harder to attain desired results, a similar assumption that proponents of standardized testing hold today. Distinct accountability systems began in England in 1833 when governments introduced funding grants to support elementary education for the children of working-class families. These grants operated on a payment by results basis; however, as the population grew, the ability to monitor this system became increasingly difficult. Additionally, with the introduction of human intelligence testing in the late 1800s, a categorical system of separating and segregating students came into account. Initially used to identify those with special needs and segregate them from the general population, IQ testing eventually became a standardized way to measure a person’s capacity to learn. Thus, standardized tests were designed for two purposes: selection and diagnosis (Black, 1998).

In Alberta, methods of standardized testing began in 1892, prior to Alberta even existing as a province. These tests were used as a means of proving that students from the prairies, who were not traditionally seen as being able to be educated (or having the need for education), were indeed capable of achieving the same standards as students in other provinces (Rymer, 2011). For 90 years, school-leaving standardized tests were worth 100% of a student’s grade. Although it was not uncommon for students to finish their schooling in Grade 9, those who chose to stay beyond that level completed final exams in each subsequent grade. In 1912, Grade 10 and 11 examinations were removed, leaving a sole Grade 12 completion exam remaining. Due to public criticism of the system, these final exams were removed entirely in 1972, and student grades became based completely on teacher-awarded classroom marks. This system faced criticism and

the standardized examination process was reinstated in 1983. At that time, the provincial achievement test program was introduced, and accountability tests were administered on a sample basis (Alberta Teachers Association, 2005). In 1984, the program expanded to include all students, and diploma examinations at the Grade 12 level were implemented to “create a consistent standard of measuring and reporting student achievement” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2005, p. 49). Prior to 2015, the diploma exams were weighted at 50% of the course grade for selected courses, a compromise from the previous 100% systems. Currently, diploma examinations are worth 30% of a student’s overall grade for the course; however, the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruptions to the program, resulting in renewed calls to rethink the use of such testing (Cairns, 2021; Starr, 2021).

“Accountability is very important because it helps ensure students receive the best possible education and success in school. The results enable the education system to know more about what is working well and what areas need more work” (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 1). Today, standardized testing is but one component of a much larger accountability and assurance framework that includes achievement results and other nonacademic assurances of student success. In trying to paint a clear picture of education for all stakeholders, the Alberta Government engages with all stakeholders and reports in a transparent manner to continually monitor and improve student learning for all (Alberta Education, 2018b). By promoting a “culture of continuous improvement and collective responsibility” (Alberta Education, 2022a, p. 16), educational stakeholders can work toward the mission of success for all students; however, to do this effectively, educators must keep in mind “the goals of assessment and how they plan to use assessment results, so that they can choose the best tools to accompany the goals at hand” (Dixson & Worrell, 2016, p. 157).

Clarifying the Purpose of Standardized Assessment in Education

According to Alberta Education (2021), the primary purpose of assessment in the province is to improve student learning. Additionally, assessment is used to enhance instruction and “assure Albertans that the education system is meeting the needs of students and achieving the outcomes of the Ministerial Order on Student Learning” (Alberta Education, 2021, p. 98). Despite these clear intentions, many barriers prevent educators from practicing effective assessment strategies to meet these goals, including misconceptions about the purpose each assessment practice serves (Aitken et al., 2011). Although Black (1998) argued that there will always be some degree of tension at play amongst the various practices, he explained that this tension, when properly understood, could create a certain level of synergy within an educational setting. The goal of a balanced assessment system is to find ways to capitalize on all forms of assessment practices in the pursuit of improved student achievement.

Issues arise when stakeholders confuse the purpose of the various formative and summative assessment practices that take place in the classroom daily with the purpose of high-stakes, standardized summative assessments that students complete once a year. These assessment practices do not exist in isolation, but along a continuum of student achievement (Black, 1998), each serving a unique function in a much larger system. In the literature, some have advocated for removal of the standardized summative evaluations, placing the emphasis of assessment on classroom practices (Kohn, 2000), whereas others have argued for a more balanced approach to assessment, one that supports the needs of all educational stakeholders and offer strategies to improve the current systems (Alberta Education, 2010b; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Chappuis et al., 2010; Stiggins, 2017; Wiggins, 2011). The reality is that both classroom and external assessment measures must exist in a truly balanced system that is focused on

supporting students in their growth and development while maintaining the support of the governing bodies that make decisions at all levels of the system. To move forward, the polarization of assessment practices in education must end and educators must remember that “standards frame accepted or valued definitions of academic success. Accountability compels attention to these standards as educators plan and deliver instruction in the classroom. Assessment provides evidence of success on the part of students, teachers, and the system” (Stiggins, 2002, p. 758).

This section clarifies the function and process of classroom-based assessment strategies to better understand how they differ from the purpose of external, standardized assessments. Additionally, this section identifies ways in which classroom and external practices can complement each other in the pursuit of a balanced system that seeks to improve student achievement. Black (1998) spoke to the importance of being clear on assessment purpose:

It is important to match the selection and use of assessment methods to the particular purpose which the assessment is meant to serve and a distinction has to be made at the outset between the purposes and the instruments and procedures that might be used. (p. 24)

Classroom Assessment

Alberta Education (2018c) requires teachers to demonstrate a professional body of knowledge by applying a “current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction and assessment practices” (p. 5) to meet the diverse learning needs of every student in the classroom. They must work diligently to apply student assessment practices that reflect the provincial learner objectives, generate enough evidence to base decisions and evaluations, offer variety for students to demonstrate their learning, and report on student achievement. It is within

the classroom that teachers have the flexibility to achieve this goal using a variety of assessment practices along with extensive instructional strategies. Teachers are given professional autonomy to use assessment in ways that are respectful of a student's development and cultural background, encourage growth and improvement and actively involve students in the process (Alberta Education, 2021). Hattie et al. (2021) explored the power of using various assessment strategies to gather evidence of each student's learning needs, "allowing teachers to make effective and efficient decisions about where to go next in the learning" (p. 34). Classroom assessment plays a significant role in influencing student achievement as it has the potential to considerably impact student learning.

Unfortunately, not all classroom assessment is created equal. When educators lack assessment literacy, they focus on high-stakes assessments, or they fail to use assessment data to guide teaching and learning, any potential gains achieved through quality assessment may instead be reflected in poor student achievement. Stiggins (2017) cautioned,

Our historical, bordering on obsessive, focus on accountability testing as the answer to school improvement has led us to overlook just how critical classroom assessment can be—and how dire the consequences of poor classroom assessment can be for learners. (p. 41)

Additionally, fear associated with the term "assessment" has led to distorted perceptions of its role within the educational context (Taras, 2008). The root word of assessment means "to sit beside," and effective assessment practices should do just that; provide educators with opportunities to sit beside students and gather evidence to make informed decisions about teaching and learning (Wiggins, 2011). Building teacher capacity to appropriately design and implement effective classroom assessment practices is essential to their effectiveness in

improving student learning. Aitken et al. (2011) found the main issues with classroom assessment were teachers not proficient in assessment practices, the overuse of single-purpose assessment strategies instead of multiple and varied approaches, inappropriate weighting, awarding zeros for work not handed in, and including behaviour indicators with academic achievement marks. Combined with the misguided assumption that high-stakes examinations dominate the teaching profession, these issues contribute to the polarized nature of assessment today.

For sound classroom assessment to occur, educators must have adequate training, strong assessment literacy, and a clear purpose for each assessment, matched with clear learning targets. Teachers need to know where the student is headed and use a variety of formative and summative assessment processes to gather evidence to move learning forward. Taras (2008) argued that “the greatest confusion and contradiction exist in the definition of terms and how summative and formative assessment relate to each other in the assessment process” (p. 188). For educators to see how these two types of assessment can complement each other, they need clarity in the purpose each serves (Dixson & Worrell, 2016).

Formative Assessment

“In the same way that our formative experiences are those experiences that shape us as individuals, formative evaluations are those that shape whatever is being evaluated” (William, 2006, p. 284). A critical element in formative assessment is using information gathered to make a change, either to the teaching or learning in the classroom. This frequent, ongoing monitoring of student progress towards a specific learning objective allows teachers to ensure that they are meeting the diverse learning needs of all the students within their classroom. Indeed, this differentiation raises achievement and closes the gaps in equity amongst students (Centre for

Research and Innovation, 2008). Likewise, effective formative assessment can exist only within a classroom culture that values and encourages the use of various assessment tools, demonstrates intentional establishment and tracking of learning goals, uses various instructional and assessment methods to meet all needs, provides timely and targeted feedback to move students forward, and actively involves students in their educational journey. Although it can be graded and reported, formative assessment is better suited for informal use within the learning environment. Dixson and Worrell (2016) warned that “formative assessment at the whole-school level, as a precursor to formal assessment, has led to teachers increasing their reliance on assessment in general” (p. 154), and this blurring of informative and summative assessment has created some of the issues seen today. Again, the need to differentiate between the purpose of formative and summative assessment is necessary in the improvement of the system. As articulated in their influential review of literature on formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) concluded that “formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement” (p. 139).

Ultimately, “formative assessment is the responsibility of the classroom teacher, but others, in school and outside, can support such work by providing training and methods” (Black 1998, p. 25). In a small-scale study on the relationship between formative and summative assessment, Taras (2008) found that despite the extensive literature that exists on formative assessment, “most of us are not left with a clear understanding because most of it focuses on functions” (p. 175). For educators to use formative assessment to guide learning, they need adequate professional (Wiliam, 2006) along with “a variety of living examples of implementation” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 146). Further research on the various methods of formative assessment is required and must be aligned with adequate teacher training in the

pursuit of a balanced assessment system. Although formative assessment is not the silver bullet that will solve all educational challenges, when used effectively, it can act as a powerful tool to support a balanced assessment system that honors student differences and works to improve achievement for all learners (Centre for Research and Innovation, 2008).

Summative Assessment

Summative assessments are “cumulative assessments that intend to capture what a student has learned, or the quality of the learning, and judge performance against some standards” (Dixson & Worrell, 2016, p. 156). Unlike formative assessment which takes place during the learning, summative assessments are typically used at the end of a unit, chapter, quarter, or semester to assess and evaluate how much learning students have gained and retained (Dixson & Worrell, 2016, p. 157). Additionally, summative assessments can be used for review within the classroom, for transfer and certification, or for accountability to the public (Black, 1998, p. 35; see also Centre for Research and Innovation, 2008). The essential component of summative assessment is that it typically occurs at the end of learning; however, when used in a classroom context, educators are given the authority to determine if an assessment should be summative or formative based on student readiness to demonstrate the specific objective. Wormeli (2018) argued that at any point, based on the evidence gathered, summative and formative assessments can be interchanged to meet the student needs within the classroom.

Although most common, classroom summative assessments do not always take the form of tests, quizzes, or exams; students can also demonstrate learning by way of assignments, products, or presentations. The data gathered from these assessments usually are depicted by grades and the accuracy and reliability of such assessments are criticized (Guskey, 2020). Wormeli (2018) advocated for a fair assessment system in which grades were used as accurate

reflections of a student's performance against a standard and nothing else. When summative classroom assessments are used to report on student attainment of objectives, the question becomes, are the results of these assessments set in stone? Arguably, student success may hinge on the answer to this question. Wormeli also argued that classroom assessments, both formative and summative, can be used interchangeably, depending on student readiness and teacher professional judgment. This flexibility demonstrates an understanding of the processes involved with assessment and moves beyond the attention to the various functions that each one serves. Taras (2010) articulated it best:

We need assessments to have the rigor and care attributed to summative work, but with the intentions to support learning and teaching, and have the positive attributes generally attributed to formative assessment. This aim is within our grasp if we focus on the processes as opposed to the functions of assessment. (p. 126)

Striking a balance between summative and formative assessment is essential to optimal student learning and achievement. When teachers begin with the end in mind, knowing what learning target students are working towards, they can use formative assessment to guide them along the path. When it comes to classroom assessment,

Good teachers allow students more than one chance to master material, and they give them full credit for the highest levels they achieve, rarely holding past aggressions against them. They recognize the developmental nature of learning, and they do not expect students to meet adult-level competencies. (Wormeli, 2018, p. 278)

In contrast, external assessment measures, which are also summative in nature, risk the potential of dominating a teachers work, providing them with poor models of assessment practices due to their limited function of providing overall summaries of achievement rather than

helpful diagnostic information (Black & Wiliam, 1998). “Teachers clearly face difficult problems in reconciling their formative and summative roles, and confusion in teachers’ minds between these roles can impede the improvement of practice” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 148).

External Assessment Measures

Standardized tests help to “identify achievement problems and provide a means for public disclosure, even if they do little to help fix those problems” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 29). They exist to evaluate schools for public accountability, compare student scores across subpopulations, identify academic needs, and inform parents and the community about a schools’ resource needs (Stiggins, 2017). They are not intended to inform instructional decisions that drive teaching and learning. In Alberta, provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations are used to monitor achievement of provincial standards and support teachers by providing information regarding student achievement at the provincial level (Aitken et al., 2011).

To view external assessments as a whole measure of an individual’s academic ability is problematic as these assessments have unique limitations. Standardized assessments cannot inform the “moment-to-moment, day-to-day, and week-to-week instructional decisions faced by students and teachers” (Stiggins, 2002, p. 763), and they are not intended to. Within their extensive literature review, Aitken et al. (2011) found that teachers’ perceptions of external accountability initiatives may “exacerbate the view that assessment is one of the most disliked and resisted components of teaching” (p. 194). Furthermore, hyper alignment of assessment in the pursuit of improving student results may restrict a teachers’ capacity to be flexible and creative in their use of classroom assessment (Cairns, 2021). The Alberta Teachers Association (2004) also argued that the misuse of these results may negatively impact instructional practices and encourage teachers to “teach to the test,” training students how to complete these

standardized assessments instead of providing them with authentic and meaningful learning experiences. In addition to these limitations, external assessment measures often neglect to account for factors beyond the control of the classroom, such as individual student needs, personal culture, home, and community supports, and other school aspects. Additionally, they are limited in their length and methodology, reflecting only a narrow band of learning targets within a given subject area (Stiggins, 2017).

Despite these numerous limitations, external assessments do offer a quick, effective snapshot of where a group of students is at in terms of meeting the standards. They allow educational stakeholders an opportunity to glance at trends over time and can highlight areas that may need improvement moving forward. They also serve as gatekeepers for high-stakes decisions (Stiggins, 2002). In the search for a clear understanding of the purpose external assessment measures serve, it is important to remember that

Schools have a responsibility to the public who fund them. One aspect of the discharge of that responsibility is to provide evidence that they are indeed promoting the learning of their students. An economical way to do this is to provide aggregation of the results of their students' performance. (Black, 1998, p. 31)

Provincial Achievement Test Program/Grade 12 Diploma Examination Program

According to Alberta Education (2022c), the purposes of the provincial achievement testing program are to determine if students are learning what they are expected to, to report to Albertans on how well student have achieved the provincial standards, and to assist schools and school authorities in monitoring and improving student learning. The *General Information Bulletin* makes it clear that despite the high-quality information that these exams generate, they “cannot provide all of the information that school staff need to know about students’

achievement” (Alberta Education, 2022c, p. 3). Additionally, it is recognized that despite these examinations taking place in Grades 6 and 9, they reflect a student’s cumulative growth throughout their entire school program, and any use of results should include all school staff. Similarly, the Grade 12 diploma examination program exists as a standard method to certify students’ level of achievement upon completion of selected Grade 12 courses of study, ensure provincial standards are maintained, and report on individual and group results (Alberta Education, 2022b). Although this program has remained relatively unchanged over the years, in 2015, the weighting of these exams was reduced from 50% to 30%, demonstrating a desire to account for most of a student’s academic success through course-awarded marks.

Again, the purpose of external, standardized assessments is to provide a provincial snapshot of student achievement to various educational stakeholders and to act as an accountability measure to the broader population who holds a vested interest in the education system in this province. Therefore, one must have a clear understanding of the role accountability plays in the use of such testing practices. Keeping the purpose in mind, “high-stakes achievement testing is merely one component in a system of continuous improvement that strives to further fine-tune, adapt, and support education” (Burger & Krueger, 2003, pp. 16–17).

Accountability and Assurance

“School authorities are accountable organizations as they are allocated funds for services rendered to the public, providing education to the K–12 students in Alberta” (Alberta Education, 2022a, p. 16). Although the Alberta Teachers Association (2005) has recognized that the purpose of accountability is to improve student achievement results, it argued that the ongoing attention placed on standardized assessments has caused a greater focus on test scores than on real learning (Alberta Teachers Association, 2004). It declared that “genuine accountability brings no

surprises. It builds on effective sharing of information and collaboration between teachers and administrators, teachers and other teachers, teachers and students and parents, schools, and community” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2005, p. 49).

Alberta Education (2018b) has argued that “accountability is very important because it helps ensure students receive the best possible education and success in school. The results enable the education system to know more about what is working well and what areas need more work” (p. 1). In Alberta, the accountability pillar has been in place since 1995 and is based on funding, flexibility, and accountability (Alberta Education, 2010a). This framework is an “innovative and straightforward way of assessing and reporting progress on learning goals for schools, school authorities, and the provincial government” (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 1). Along with student learning achievement data gathered through the results of standardized assessments, the province gathers evidence on safe and caring schools, student learning opportunities, preparation for lifelong learning, employment and citizenship, parental involvement, and continuous school improvement through annual student, parent, and teacher surveys. The results depict a 4-year comparison between the school authority and province for academic evaluations and within the school authority for improvement evaluations. Alberta Education (2022c) “does not endorse the publication of rank-ordered lists of schools” (p. 52).

To further enhance public trust and confidence, Alberta Education introduced the assurance framework in 2020. This model built on the existing accountability framework by addressing the need for “continuous improvement” through a cycle of “exploring, developing, taking action, and evaluation” (Alberta Education, 2022a, p. 16). Through evidence-informed decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and continuous learning, this framework seeks to create a culture in Alberta Education that embraces the collective responsibility for continuous

growth and improvement. Five domains are encompassed within the framework: student growth and achievement, teaching and learning, learning supports, governance, and local and societal contexts. Of note, within the student growth and achievement domain, the framework speaks to the desire to create stronger student efficacy by supporting students in using assessment to guide their own learning purposes. As the primary stakeholder in education, students are empowered to have a stronger voice in their learning.

All stakeholders desire the same outcome for students in Alberta: to improve student achievement. To close the divide between classroom assessment practices, which educators know significantly impact student learning, and the measures that support accountability and assurance, it is crucial that the needs of all assessment users be made clear. By redefining the purpose for each style of assessment, a more effective system that balances the information needs of all users can be created. However, Wiliam (2010) cautioned those in pursuit of this endeavour by stating, “Although accountability testing can raise student achievement on a broad range of measures, much of the critique has focused on the ‘collateral damage’—the unintended consequences of the sue of such accountability regimes” (p. 118). For example, disproportionate focus on tested content, demoralization of teachers, and undue pressure on students, all of which are explored in the next section of this study, can significantly impact both students and teachers. When these concerns are addressed and those with an interest in public education come together to create a balanced assessment system, it will become clear that “we can have public accountability and quality assessment in all contexts only if we balance the information needs of all users” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 46).

Barriers to a Balanced System

“Assessment and related terms are heavily value and emotionally laden” (Taras, 2010, p. 124). This creates the ideal conditions for misunderstanding, confusion, and overall negative perceptions of assessment within the educational context. As “our beliefs about teaching and learning drive our decisions about implementation” (Hattie et al., 2021), it is imperative to address the emotional attachment educators have to assessment practices. To support this emotional link, Stiggins (2017) found that

The school environments most of us were raised in left us with a dispositional bias; the perspective that being evaluated is a potentially dangerous enterprise, that tests mean the possibility of failure, and that test failure is something we must strive to avoid. (p. 62)

Emotional elements, coupled with historical misuse of results, play a significant role in how educators view and use various assessment practices. Aitken et al. (2011) found that educators’ emotional outlook on assessment ranged from confident to complete mistrust and even paranoia. Problems in thinking occur when the function of assessment is unclear, and the processes of assessment are buried beneath emotions, attitudes, and behaviours linked to assessment practices. All educational stakeholders want to do “the best thing for all involved” (Burger & Krueger, 2003, p. 15), but when a culture of mistrust exists, it can be difficult to see the common goal.

Once the purposes of various assessment practices are clarified, it is important to acknowledge the barriers that prevent stakeholders from adapting to a system that balances the information needs for all. Researchers from the Centre for Research and Innovation (2008) identified two main barriers to the broad and effective use of formative assessment. First, the ongoing tension exists between what happens in the classroom and the high-stakes summative

evaluations that hold schools accountable. These assessment practices are too often seen as separate entities instead of being part of the same continuum (Black, 1998), and the constant discourse between the two leads to inevitable tension and difficulty seeing how they can work together. Second, the research found there was a significant disconnect between the systemic, school, and classroom approaches to assessment and evaluation. This disconnect, including the misuse of results, can exacerbate issues of trust and skew the understanding of the purpose standardized assessment serves. The Alberta Teachers Association (2004) reported that common misuses of results include ranking of schools, evaluating teachers, comparing students, comparing schools, and rewarding student achievement.

Wiliam (2010) stated that “the key assumption of accountability testing is that differences in the achievement of students on standardized tests should be primarily attributed to differences in the quality of education received by the students” (pp. 107–108). This misconception leads to significant unintended consequences that impact all stakeholders, specifically, students and the teachers tasked with supporting their academic development. Wiliam (2010) discovered that significant intended negative effects of high-stakes accountability testing were inconclusive; however, the unintended consequences, such as disproportionate focus on test content, demoralization of teachers, and the undue pressures on students, acted as “collateral damage” (p. 118) in this assessment process. Wiliam argued that there is a case to be made for the use of such tests, but that “considerable work needs to be done to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of such regimes” (p. 120).

Impacts of Standardized Assessment

By clarifying the purpose of assessment practices, particularly standardized assessment practices, educational stakeholders can select and implement the appropriate tools to achieve the

desired outcomes. These tests exist to provide a snapshot of achievement and hold the education system accountable to its invested stakeholders; however, “arguments for and against testing concern the issues of fairness and usefulness of testing for teachers and students, juxtaposed with the publics and government’s need to know how well schools are performing” (Burger & Krueger, 2003, p. 1). Unfortunately, the unintended consequences of these high-stakes tests may outweigh the benefits of their function in the current system (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Stiggins, 2017).

To understand the impacts of standardized assessment practices, it is important to explore the benefits and disadvantages they have for all stakeholders, particularly students and teachers. The focus of this section is on middle and high school students as they are the most impacted by provincial standardized testing measures. Likewise, the teachers who are tasked with instructing them and preparing them for these assessments are also significantly impacted by the pressures associated with these evaluations. “As more importance is placed on standardized testing programs, the need to analyze the intended and unintended consequences of testing students increases” (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007, p. 33).

Impacts on Students

Alberta’s Education Act (2012) recognizes students as “partners in education” (p. 38), having the responsibility to learn and engage with their education. Unfortunately, too often students are left out of conversations regarding instruction and assessment, subsequently leaving them out of the processes that should invite them into learning (Kelly, 2019). Stiggins (2002) argued that “our current assessment systems are harming large numbers of students” due to “our failure to balance our use of standardized tests and classroom assessments in the service of school improvement” (p. 758). In the pursuit of accountability, transparency, and improved

student learning, the polarization of stakeholders has had an overall negative impact on the students within the system (Burger & Krueger, 2003; Feldman, 2020; Kohn, 2000; Stiggins, 2017). Students, especially those in middle and high school, can offer a unique perspective about the standardized assessment practices that they are a part of. Advocating for more consideration to be given to the needs of those who are most affected by standardized assessments, Kelly (2019) questioned, “What are we doing to our children in the name of accountability and assessment?” (p. 124).

An exam becomes high-stakes when the results are used to “evaluate students, teachers, schools, or to determine education funding” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2004, p. 5). At a weighting of 30%, Alberta Grade 12 diploma exams are considered high stakes and can have significant implications on the overall evaluation of a student’s high school completion portfolio. In 2011 Alberta Education conducted a student engagement session, *Speak Out*, designed to solicit student feedback on diploma examinations in Alberta. The session chair, Rymer (2011), reported that 70% of the students in attendance stated that they disliked or even hated diploma exams. Other results from the feedback indicated that these students were concerned with the design, purpose, limitations, size, and very nature of these examinations. Offering suggestions for improvement, the students shared that they were interested in the possibility of being tested on material periodically throughout the course instead of at the end, they advocated for an increase to the time limits that were given, and they suggested a reduced weighting of the exam from 50% to 30% so that an off day did not have the potential to severely impact the outcomes of the course. Students also said they experienced stress associated with the exams, due to both the limited amount of time to write them and the high pressure to succeed (Rymer, 2011).

Similarly, a study conducted by Klinger and Luce-Kapler (2007) examined Ontario student's perceptions of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test exams given in Grade 10 as a requirement for high school completion in that province. The findings demonstrated students' overall frustration with the exams, stating that they found the preparation for them interfered with their schooling. Like other ongoing professional and academic debates on the subject, the students provided mixed reviews regarding this standardized literacy test. Those for the test mentioned the need for accountability, identifying student learning needs, and consistency in education throughout the province. Those against them spoke to their limited value, duplication of information being learned and assessed in class, and an overall lack of fairness in the test in meeting the diverse needs of students (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007).

In a qualitative case study examining students' perceptions of standardized testing, Kelly (2019) reported that students demonstrated adverse attitudes, feelings, and experiences with testing practices. Kelly concluded that students were unclear of the purpose and consequences of standardized assessments and made mention of a perceived hierarchy of power and control that exists within a school. The students stated that they see themselves as obedient subjects within the education system being "manipulated, regulated, and disciplined to view standardized testing as a natural part of what it means to be a public school student" (Kelly, 2019, p. 107). Taking students' perceptions into account, it is beneficial to further explore the implications of standardized testing on their overall learning and achievement.

Students who have a history of struggle, have diverse learning needs, or come from cultures outside of the mainstream, are at a disadvantage when it comes to standardized testing. Kohn (2000) argued that these tests, "while bad news across the board, are especially hurtful to students who need our help the most" (p. 60). Although the traditional role of these assessments

has been to provide evidence of student achievement, it is important to also examine the impacts on those students for whom the evidence demonstrates struggles. As Stiggins (2017) found, these “students become frustrated at their chronic failure and give up in hopelessness” (p. 7).

De Castella et al. (2013) conducted a study that examined the relationship between fear of failure and academic engagement; they found that “helplessness, self-handicapping, truancy, and disengagement were all associated with a heightened fear of failure” (p. 875). For students who have experienced a history of academic failure, standardized assessments often provide them with yet another prospect of not being able to achieve at a certain level, and when the stakes are high, when high school completion is attached to the outcome, these students will often voluntarily withdraw effort, leaving poor performance to be attributed to low ability (Thompson, 1994). Additionally, implications of these failures stretch far beyond the classroom:

Students who come to see themselves as unable to learn usually cease to take school seriously. Many become disruptive; others report to truancy. Such young people are likely to be alienated from society and to become the sources and the victims of serious social problems. (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 141)

In addition to the fear of failure that inhibits learning and depresses motivation, Burger and Krueger (2003) found that the emotional impacts of testing are often exhibited as apathy, anxiety, hyper motivation to succeed, lack of genuine effort, and increased use of inappropriate strategies such as cheating and cramming. Additionally, older students may develop associations between high-stakes achievement tests and decisions being made about their lives, which can act as a barrier to school completion for some. Burger and Krueger reported that

If students believe that the tests are not accurate representations of their abilities, or that the tests represent an impossible level of achievement, or that they tests are being used to

judge or label them, the students may become disillusioned and simply exit from a system they feel is flawed. (2003, p. 6)

Despite the negative impacts that testing can have on many students, it is important to note that it can also have a positive impact on others. Those students that value testing “may demonstrate a desire to succeed and although may experience stress, it is manifested in a positive way with positive results” (Burger & Krueger, 2003).

In either case, “if we want to maximize students’ learning, we need to minimize their stress” (Feldman, 2020, p. 16). Although standardized assessments “do not yield the kinds of evidence required for sound instructional decision making where it really matters” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 5), it is imperative that a conscious effort be made to balance the system by clarifying the purpose of standardized assessment and working to support strong assessment practices directly in the classroom. This balanced assessment system can “help [all] students develop a desire to succeed, [build] confidence in their ability to succeed, [discover] motivation to strive, [feel] a sense of value of their relationship with their teacher, and [gain] a sense of control over their own academic well-being” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 60). Although the benefits may be more significant for lower achievers, balancing an assessment system with a focus on improved classroom assessment will increase overall achievement for all students (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Stakeholders can no longer accept a system that allows students to “give up in hopelessness” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 7) when the goal is to achieve “optimal learning for all students” (Alberta Education, 2018c, p. 2).

Impacts on Teachers

“The role of the teacher is a critically important factor influencing student achievement” (Burger & Krueger, 2003, p. 7). Teachers have a professional obligation to meet the learning

needs of all students. They are tasked with engaging in career-long learning, demonstrating a professional body of knowledge, and establishing inclusive learning environments, all while adhering to legal frameworks and policies (Alberta Education, 2018c). Balancing their use of classroom assessments that inform teaching and learning with the need to be accountable to various educational stakeholders can pose a challenge when the purpose of each tool appears to be contradictory to another. The Centre for Research and Innovation (2008) found that

In environments where summative tests have high visibility, teachers often feel compelled to “teach to the test,” and students are encouraged to meet performance goals (to perform well on the test) at the expense of learning goals (that is, to understand and master new knowledge). (p. 3)

This section examines both the intentional and unintentional impacts that teachers in middle and high school face in the name of standardized testing.

The values, beliefs, and attitudes that teachers hold about their role in implementing instructional and assessment practices impact the decisions they make within the classroom (Hattie et al., 2021); therefore, it is relevant to examine the perceptions teachers hold regarding standardized assessment and the impacts that these perceptions have on how teachers guide learning. Burger and Krueger (2003) found that those who supported standardized testing felt confident that learning was enhanced because educational programming and student outcomes were measured in a consistent manner, and that the results of such assessment do support decision-making about curriculum, programs, and overall school effectiveness. By their very design, standardized assessments reduce the level of subjectivity by “making the parameters, processes, and products explicit and transparent” (Taras, 2010, p. 128). Some educators support the use of standardized assessments as a measure of accountability and as a communication tool

to parents and other stakeholders about the current state of education in this province. In some situations, teachers may even use the results of external assessments to inform their pedagogy and support improvement of their own teaching practices. A study conducted by Jones and Egley (2004) found that teachers are not opposed to accountability; however, they are concerned with the ways in which this accountability is currently measured.

Arguments against the use of standardized testing, particularly in regard to its impact on teachers, can be found in much of the educational literature (Aitken et al., 2011; Alberta Teachers Association, 2004; Burger & Krueger, 2003; Cairns, 2021; Jones & Egley, 2004; Stiggins, 2017). Jones and Egley (2004) reported that teachers felt the results of standardized tests are often used inappropriately, do not accurately reflect students' learning and development, and have negative effects on the curriculum, teaching, and learning, as well as on student and teacher motivation. In a similar study, Burger and Krueger (2003) reported that educators felt standardized testing increased educational failure, held teachers responsible for results with inequitable resources, solidified class and racial disparities, objectified a subjective system, and led to the polarization of teachers and other educational stakeholders. Emotional factors are also an intertwined component of the negative perceptions that teachers hold toward standardized assessment practices. Aitken et al. (2011) found that what was often perceived as stress on students due to standardized assessment was actually stressors associated with adults. They argued that the "high-stakes" referred to "high-emotional stakes" and that when teachers with poor achievement results are disallowed from teaching particular grade levels or subjects to avoid further negative results, that the stakes had dire consequences on the teachers instead of the students.

Similarly, Burger and Krueger (2003) found that some teachers internalize test results, and translate poor results into feelings of embarrassment, guilt, anger, or shame. These feelings are based on a belief that they have failed to prepare their students appropriately or adequately for the test, which may lead to blame and questioning of the assessment. Unfortunately, these internalized feelings may impact teacher performance, leading them to behave in ways that do not best support the learning needs of the students they serve. Contrary, if test scores are high, teachers may feel pressured to produce the same results or rely on the effect that socioeconomic factors have on attaining such results.

The increasing emphasis placed on accountability in education has “implications for teachers’ curricular practices and wider equity issues” (Cairns, 2021, p. 331). This attention to exam alignment pervades teaching, especially at the high school level where graduation requirements hinge on the attainment of certain Grade 12 courses and diploma examinations. Cairns (2021) explored the notion of *exam washback* where assessment models and rubrics are filtered down in grade levels to prepare students for high-stakes standardized assessment practices. This practice has significant effects on teacher pedagogy, as well as on instruction and assessment strategies used by teachers in grades leading up to the exam. Exam washback happens in secondary school all the time in preparation for the exit exams students will inevitably write. For example, practice reading comprehension tests are used in Grade 10 and Grade 11 to build students’ skills in preparation for the Part B English diploma exam at the end of English 30. Often, these tests are made up of previous diploma exams with the thought that by using the same format, students will improve in their ability to demonstrate the skills of reading comprehension.

Putwain and von der Embse (2018) studied teacher use of timing reminders and fear appeals prior to examinations. The results indicated that these behaviours were used more frequently when teachers believed that the test outcomes were important, when they had lower self-efficacy to engage students, and when they believed the students would interpret the messages as threatening. They explained that “fear appeals are persuasive messages given to students that describe how a particular course of action can lead to negative consequences and how an alternate course of action can avoid those negative consequences” (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018, p. 1002). Timing reminders are messages that highlight the date and timing of upcoming examinations, along with the remaining time for preparing for such exams. Findings from the study suggested that teachers used fear appeals more if they believed students would find them motivating and less if they would find them worrisome and anxiety provoking. This study also found that teachers with high self-efficacy reported using less frequent fear appeals and timing reminders. Those teachers who attached greater importance to testing outcomes for their own professional identity reported using fear appeals and timing reminders more frequently (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018).

Although Alberta Education (2021) “encourages comparisons of local results with local targets” (p. 100), the results of standardized assessments have been misused by organizations such as The Fraser Institute and ranking systems that have pitted the quality of education in one school against that of other schools. Increasingly, international summative assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment have been important for comparing national education systems, promoting a culture of ranking and competition (Centre for Research and Innovation, 2008, p. 1). Unfortunately, the “publishing of school results can generate considerable harm by placing unwarranted pressure on teachers, administrators, and ultimately

students themselves to increase test scores or risk losing status within the community” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2004, p. 9).

Although standardized assessments provide data for tracking trends and measuring some standards, they do not provide teachers with immediately usable information that can impact teaching and learning (Stiggins, 2017). By clarifying the purpose of these assessments, educators will better understand that “such tests are simply too infrequent and superficial to inform the instructional decisions that drive teaching and learning or school quality” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 41). Additional criticism regarding the design and structure of external standardized assessments is concerned with the testing of low-order thinking skills. These assessments do not examine deep, higher-order mastery of the objectives students are to achieve. Stiggins (2017) stated,

In the case of large-scale standardized testing, the logistical demands of mass testing have had a strong impact on what gets tested. Faced with the need to assess hundreds of thousands of students statewide, the only economically feasible method is a machine-scored, multiple-choice test, meaning that the only targets that can be tested are those that can be translated into that format. (pp. 47–48)

When it comes to Grade 12 diploma examinations in Alberta, the Alberta Teachers Association (2004) acknowledged that ongoing participation of the teaching profession is essential in order to maintain the integrity of the diploma examination program. However, the increased security surrounding these exams and the removal of teachers/Alberta Teachers Association members on technical review committees has undermined the professional credibility of teachers and created an increased level of mistrust amongst teachers.

To better understand why educators hold such misconceptions regarding the purpose of standardized assessment, Stiggins (2017) addressed the fact that often educators' own schooling

left them with a bias against testing. Testing brings with it the possibility of failure, and failure is an undesirable experience. Due to this bias, educators are not only uncomfortable with assessment, but they “often choose to remain unschooled in the difference between sound and unsound assessments, and thus, are unable to assure assessment quality in [their] own particular context, whether that’s the local district level, school level or within their own classrooms” (Stiggins, 2017, p. 63). Aitken et al. (2011) reported that “Alberta teachers have demonstrated considerable capacity to adopt innovative teaching strategies, but not innovative assessment practices” (p. 202). Throughout the educational system, from preservice to ongoing professional development, there continues to be a strong and urgent need for more effective learning opportunities for teachers related to improvement of student assessment practices.

Impacts on Parents, Policymakers, and Principals

The data gathered by standardized assessments provide a means of communication to various educational stakeholders. As an accountability measure, the results gathered from such tests can assist decision-making at all levels of education (school, district, and provincial), resource allocation, staffing, and even student placement, as well as inform parents and policymakers about the overall quality and effectiveness of education in Alberta. Although the data are limited in scope and not meant to replace the evidence gathered by day-to-day assessments conducted within the classroom, these assessments can indeed serve a purpose within the broader context of education. However, Stiggins (2017) cautioned that educational stakeholders must see assessment not only as an accountability tool, but also as a “powerful means of supporting learning” (p. 4). He went on to state that assessment literacy for all educational stakeholders is foundational to the development of a strong and productive assessment system.

The impacts of negative perceptions of the purpose of assessment can be found within all stakeholder groups. The Alberta Teachers Association (2004) warned that public reporting of test results must include information that prevents misinterpretations of the results that could lead to inaccurate views regarding the use of assessment practices. As cited by Aitken et al. (2011), these inaccurate views included the belief that educators used assessment data as a behaviour-management strategy or a punishment, that there was cheating on the administration of provincial assessments, and that teachers were teaching to the test even though standardized assessments cover only a portion of the curriculum. Other findings within this study suggested that stakeholders have an overall lack of trust in teacher judgment and are concerned about the perceived distancing of parents from the school (Aitken et al., 2011). Also, some held doubts about the reporting of student achievement due to the use of educational jargon and a lack of comparative information amongst a set peer group. Additionally, delays in information from the province to the school hindered the ability to use the data in a productive manner. Aitken et al.'s (2011) study found that there was a need for strong provincial leadership when it comes to establishing and maintaining high-quality educational programs, as well as a need for greater use of assessment data for instructional leadership purposes by principals. Ultimately, better relationships and more effective communication among stakeholders are crucial to improving the current system of assessment in education.

“Like everyone else, principals have different personal viewpoints on standardized testing. Yet, no matter what [their] beliefs, [they] must deal with the reality of standardized tests” (Whitaker, 2020, p. 76). Strong school leadership is integral in the appropriate use of data garnished from provincial standardized tests. Alberta Education (2018a) stated that “quality leadership occurs when the leader’s ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what

leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students” (p. 3). By creating and nurturing a culture that “supports evidence-informed teaching and learning” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 5), school principals can guide their learning communities towards balanced assessment systems, ones that debunk the misconceptions that prevail about educational assessment today.

In order to provide this guidance, principals must possess an in-depth understanding of assessment themselves and be cautious of their own personal biases. Aitken et al. (2011) noted that

A preoccupation with “high-stakes tests results” may encourage micromanagement styles that undermine teacher morale. Additionally, administrators that feel the need to “boycott ministry initiatives” in the belief that they are protecting their staff from misuse of assessment data, may actually be encouraging the tensions associated with student achievement and standardized testing. (p. 203)

When principals keep in mind that standardized assessments measure only a small part of what schools should be doing and instead “focus on the behaviours that lead to success, not the beliefs that stand in the way” (Whitaker, 2020, p. 79), they can be more effective in promoting a strong culture of student-centered learning. “In an ideal system, the educational partners work together toward a culture of ingenuity, sharing values and goals, encouraging flexibility and responsiveness, and building capacity to fulfill their roles and responsibilities properly” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2005, p. 55).

The Way to a Balanced Assessment System

Assessment in education is an integral component of supporting student achievement. As an important function of the system, educational stakeholders have an obligation to ensure that

the evaluation of students is fair, equitable, and appropriately balanced to serve all relevant uses and users in the pursuit of improved learning (Stiggins, 2017). Stiggins (2017) boldly stated that “an assessment crisis that has been simmering for decades is finally boiling over, and the time has come to take overdue and assertive action to improve both specific testing practices and our entire assessment culture” (p. 2). To create a balanced assessment system, stakeholders must collectively create a culture where assessment information is gathered and evaluated to determine what works and why in order to determine areas for improvement (Centre for Research and Innovation, 2008). This section clarifies the features of a balanced assessment system; explains the role of those involved in the system, especially school leaders; and offers an action plan for developing a balanced assessment system at the school level.

What Is a Balanced Assessment System?

Building a culture of evidence-based student assessment requires a balance between advocating its uses and having a genuine responsiveness to concerns that emerge within the system. Robinson (2011) stated,

Schools are complex organizations with multiple competing agendas. Each agenda has its champions who argue for their preferred curriculum, teaching approach, or budget priority. Constantly changing external policy agendas contribute to the complexity. With each change of government, something else is added to the long list of school responsibilities, and only rarely is anything subtracted. Under these conditions, it is easy to see why schools can become fragmented and incoherent rather than united and purposeful. (p. 45)

Supporting these complex organizations requires a careful and systematic approach to organizing and managing the components within it.

A balanced assessment system supports “multiple functions of classroom assessment and provides appropriate feedback to students, parents, and policymakers” (Burger & Krueger, 2003, p. 1). This system focuses on the goal of continuous improvement while serving the needs of all stakeholders. Improvements on provincial standardized assessments will inevitably reflect the attention given to assessment within the classroom. These separate assessment functions need not be seen as isolated entities, but rather as two ends of a continuum that supports student achievement. In education, every decision must revolve around student learning and when assessment systems keep that in mind, all stakeholders are better equipped to move forward in the best interest of students.

Wiggins (2011) argued that “as long as we hold simplistic monitoring tests to be adequate models of and incentive for reaching our intellectual standards, student performance, teaching and our thinking and discussion about assessment will remain flaccid and uninspired” (p. 92). Now is the time to continue promoting conversations around what sound assessment practices entail; to build assessment literacy amongst all stakeholders; and to design balanced, systematic approaches that use assessment to support the learning needs of all students. This system must carefully monitor intended learning outcomes, provide data on the progression through those outcomes, and continue to promote classroom assessment practices that increase achievement for all students (Chappuis et al., 2010). Any attempts the system makes to improve performance must come from the classroom and not from changes to the external measures used for accountability and assurance within this province (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Alberta Education (2010b) and Stiggins (2017) identified five key elements to a balanced assessment system. First, all stakeholders must have a clear understanding of the function each type of assessment serves within the system. Lack of clarity leads to confusion,

misunderstanding, and an overall lack of trust amongst stakeholders. Second, assessments must be based on learning targets as identified within the program of studies. These objectives must be clearly stated and easy to interpret by students, teachers, and parents. Third, all assessments must be of sound quality, created and designed in a manner that accurately measures the learning outcomes, varied in their approach, and able to meet the learning needs of the diverse students in Alberta schools. Fourth, communication of the results of such assessments must be provided in a timely and relevant manner, with feedback that informs the recipient of strengths and areas for improvement. Finally, assessment must be used to motivate students by engaging them as active participants in their learning and supporting individual progression towards learning goals.

Roles and Responsibilities Within a Balanced Assessment System

The benefits of improving assessment systems target all invested stakeholders. When they work together for the betterment of the system and the students at its core, improvement is inevitable. Guskey (2020) shared his thoughts on building assessment literacy for all within the system to improve student achievement. He argued that assessment literacy can “broaden the ways teachers gather information on student learning and use that information to improve instruction” (Guskey, 2020, p. 8) and enable students themselves to use the information gathered from assessments to enhance their own learning. Developing parents’, community members’, and policymakers’ interpretations of assessment results promotes greater involvement of all within the system.

As a public entity, the education sector and the decisions made within it must be transparent to all. School authorities and the Minister of Education have the responsibility of reporting to the public on the nature and quality of education in Alberta (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019; Education Act, 2012); therefore, it is vital that they have a sound

understanding about assessment practices and the various purposes they serve within the system. Additionally, an important component of reporting is the analysis of results, discussions surrounding current problems, and the articulation of measures designed to address the issues. Guskey (2020) argued that “increasing assessment literacy among stakeholders in the assessment process will help improve our schools, but only if efforts also target the policy-makers and legislators who make the important decisions about the format and structure of high-stakes accountability assessments” (p. 13). Therefore, the first focus in the pursuit of a balanced assessment system should be on improving the assessment literacy of policymakers and legislators. Although the role of school leaders is explored in more detail later, it is important to mention here that they play an integral part in supporting these decision-makers in becoming more literate in every aspect of the assessment process (Guskey, 2020). Leaders must advocate for accountability assessments to model the types of assessments used in the classroom both to measure student achievement and to guide improvements in teaching and learning.

As partners in education, parents and their children have a right to be informed about their progress through the education system (Education Act, 2012). By developing a shared understanding of the purpose and process of assessment, parents and students will have a well-informed interpretation of the assessment results they receive. Additionally, through enhanced literacy, they will understand the limitations of the results. Arguably, the most impacted stakeholders in education are the students themselves. By actively involving them in a system that seeks to balance its use of formative and summative assessment, they can uphold their responsibility to be active participants in their learning and become better managers and self-regulators of their own learning (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019; Education Act, 2012). The benefits to students are numerous and include increased self-efficacy, motivation, success, and

engagement in their learning, all of which result in improved student achievement across the board.

Teachers are obligated to carry out frequent and fair evaluations of students' work and base decisions of promotion and final grades on adequate records of the performance of each student (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019; Education Act, 2012). By improving assessment literacy within a balanced system, teachers develop a better understanding of how to construct authentic assessments that examine students' performance in real-world contexts; design assessment that yield reliable results and are aligned with high-level, cognitively complex learning goals; and learn how to gain better evidence of student learning (Guskey, 2020). Unfortunately, "in low-trust environments, in which teachers fear that data could be used against them, public discussion of assessments may be seen as threatening and risky, triggering defensiveness rather than learning" (Robinson, 2011, p. 94). In a balanced assessment system trust is developed through a common understanding of roles and responsibilities, so that together, all can collectively work toward a similar objective. With increasing calls for accountability and a desire to improve test scores, "improving leadership knowledge and skill is being leveraged as one more strategy directly aimed at raising student achievement" (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 3).

School Leaders: Supporting the Development of a Balanced Assessment System

Alberta Education (2018a) identified the role of a school leader as one who fosters effective relationships by acting consistently in the best interests of students, engages with others to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise, builds a shared understanding of current trends, creates a shared vision of student success, nurtures a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning, and provides instructional leadership to support teachers in the pursuit of optimal learning experiences for all students. Their impact

stretches beyond student achievement, as they have the ability to influence other aspects of a student's and teacher's academic journey, such as attendance, overall well-being, and staff retention (Grissom et al., 2021). Motivated by a desire to make a difference in the lives of students by increasing their confidence and providing them with opportunities to grow, school leaders have a significant role to play in supporting student academic success (Robinson, 2011). Specifically, in regard to supporting balanced assessment systems within a school community,

Leadership *for* assessment balance and quality begins with a guiding vision, showing how assessment fits into and supports instruction. School leaders should understand the importance of quality assessment at all levels and support standards of quality that will guide assessment practices in every classroom. (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 83)

Research shows that great leaders possess qualities that have substantial influence on student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Whitaker, 2020). These leaders create the conditions necessary for transformational teaching and learning to take place, which indirectly, but significantly, impact student achievement (Robinson, 2011). Hattie et al. (2021) argued that “to move from *what works* to *what works best*, educators must consider the magnitude of the impact” (p. 4), and the greatest impact at the school level is the quality of teaching happening within the classroom (Robinson, 2011). This, along with establishing clear goals and expectations, strategic use of resources, supporting ongoing teacher learning and development, and creating a safe and orderly environment contribute to a leader's ability to effectively improve achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Robinson, 2011).

“If leaders are to achieve the expected results, they need access to up-to-date knowledge about teaching and learning and skill in using that knowledge to shape educationally sound administrative practices” (Robinson, 2011, p. 149). Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012)

conducted extensive research on the link between leadership and student achievement and they found that when it comes to instructional leadership, principals demonstrated two complimentary behaviours that influenced instruction: one was that they worked to build a culture within their school communities that encouraged continuous professional learning, and the other behaviour involved taking explicit steps to engage with teachers about their growth and development. Of note, they found that secondary teachers rarely reported administrators engaging in instructional action, instead reporting that this role was predominantly filled by department heads and other teacher leaders within the school. As a critical element in supporting quality teaching, instructional leadership is a responsibility that can be shared amongst many members of a school community (Robinson, 2011). When educational leaders support teachers in their assessment practices by providing them with quality instructional leadership, they support the development of a balanced assessment system.

In her research on student-centered leadership, Robinson (2011) found that the leadership in schools with high student achievement looked very different than that of low-performing schools. Robinson stated, “In higher-performing schools it is much more focused on the business of improving learning and teaching” (2011, p. 3). These clear goals and expectations must be carefully articulated by principals and revisited often to ensure common understanding. It is also imperative that leaders use evidence of student needs to drive the direction of the goals within their school. The importance of data use cannot be underestimated. As school authorities develop their priorities, aligned with those of the provincial government, principals must use data derived from their local context to establish goals for their school. As Robinson (2011) articulated,

The importance of using data is repeated so often that it is assumed that everyone knows why it is important. A common understanding of purpose should not be assumed,

however, because there are many possible uses for data and some of them have little to do with increasing the impact of teaching on the engagement and success of students. The purpose of data use . . . is to assist individual and collaborative reflection on the quality of decisions about how and what to teach and the quality of decisions about the administrative and organizational supports for such teaching. (p. 94)

In relation to standardized assessment practices, Whitaker (2020) stated that “great principals keep standardized testing in perspective and focus on the real issue of student learning” (p. 80). Although the data generated from such testing can provide some evidence for leaders to use, leaders must also work to guide staff away from “debating the merits of standardized testing” (Whitaker, 2020, p. 76) and instead focus on the behaviours that lead to academic success for students. Leaders who embrace the pressures of external assessment, carefully evaluate the data, and use it to generate change and improvement are more effective in increasing student achievement (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012).

Robinson (2011) reported a strong correlation ($r = .84$) between student achievement and teacher professional development stating, “the most powerful way that school leaders can make a difference to the learning of their students is by promoting and participating in the professional learning and development of their teachers” (p. 104). By using evidence about student learning gathered in a variety of ways to inform decisions about what “professional learning is needed, whether it is working, who it is working for and when it should end” (Robinson, 2011, p. 109), leaders can be effective in moving towards improvement of student achievement. For professional development to be effective, it must serve both student and teacher learning needs, focus on relationships between teaching and learning, provide worthwhile content, integrate theory and practice, rely on external expertise, and provide multiple opportunities to learn

(Robinson, 2011). Leaders can support a balanced assessment system in their schools by committing attention to ongoing professional development focused on improving formative and summative assessment practices and building literacy in regard to interpretation of evidence gathered from both classroom and external assessments.

School leaders have a significant role to play in developing a strong professional community: “a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning” (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012, p. 25). This professional community contributes to the overall culture associated with strong instructional practices and ultimately high student achievement. By fostering effective relationships, and acting with fairness, respect, and integrity (Alberta Education, 2018a), leaders are able to create an environment that is conducive to the development of student achievement. These leaders must be adaptive and responsive to the needs of those they lead, and this requires trust, vulnerability, transparency, and a personal investment in people. As a leading researcher in adaptive leadership, Heifetz et al. (2009) stated,

One distinctive aspect of leading adaptive change is that you must connect with the values, beliefs, and anxieties of the people you are trying to move. Being present in that way is tough to do unless your heart is part of the mix as well. Acts of leadership not only require access to all parts of yourself so that you can draw upon all of your own resources for will, skill, and wisdom; but to be successful, you also need to fully engage people with all these parts of yourself as well. (p. 38)

“Leadership affects student learning when it is adaptive to the specific needs of the local setting, which includes significant variations in capacity, structure, and needs among buildings in the same district” (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012, pp. 234–235). Heifetz et al. (2009) used

the metaphor of the dance floor and balcony to speak about adaptive leadership, stating that in order to influence change in any system, a leader must be able to both diagnose and take action. Part of diagnosis involves being on the dance floor, working alongside students and teachers, listening to what they have to say about the current workings of the system in order to better understand and identify the areas of strength and need. Adaptive leadership also requires leaders to possess the ability to step off the dance floor and onto the balcony, providing some distance to capture the big picture and spend time evaluating the situation. As leaders bring their own personal opinions and biases about assessment to the work they do, it is essential for them to critically reflect on their own attitudes and behaviours prior to initiating interventions within a complex organization. In establishing a balanced assessment system, leaders must first identify whether the issues within the system are technical problems or adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Heifetz et al. (2009) described technical problems as those which can be “complex and critically important” (p. 19) but typically solved through the application of an organization’s current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, “can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19). Arguably, many of the necessary shifts required within current assessment systems are of the latter nature and demand a more sensitive approach by educational leaders. This kind of change requires one to “help people navigate through a period of disturbance as they shift through what is essential and what is expendable, and as they experiment with solutions to the adaptive challenge at hand” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 28).

A Balanced Assessment Action Plan

As educators strive for a balanced approach to assessment in education, it is important to acknowledge what is currently working within the system as it exists. Clarifying the purpose of

classroom and external assessment and the roles they play in the pursuit of student achievement is essential to determining next steps moving forward. The Alberta Teachers Association (2005) offered suggestions for how to improve the system as it existed at the time. They argued that a balanced system ensured that educational assessments addressed a full range of educational goals, focused on meeting quality standards not standardization (no more teaching to the test), used measures of accountability to improve the system, increased public confidence through transparent reporting of provincial assessment results and processes, allocated more resources, enhanced and clarified the roles and responsibilities for all educational stakeholders, supported teacher professionalism and development, and used a review mechanism to monitor the effectiveness of the system. Many years later, educational stakeholders are still advocating for many of these same conditions to be met (Chappuis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Stiggins, 2017). Similarly, Wiliam (2010) offered suggestions for improving accountability testing practices, arguing that a reduction in curricular objectives, centered around key concepts, would be beneficial and that testing should focus on mastery of concepts and not skills. Additionally, Stiggins (2017) felt that curricular goals need to be expressed in language that is comprehensible to teachers, tests must be designed so that student's mastery can be assessed within reasonable accuracy, and tests should be administered in a timely manner so that teachers can use the outcomes to inform their instruction.

For a balanced assessment system to function appropriately, all educational partners need to agree that the purpose of accountability in education is to support the broad goals of education and the diverse learning needs of all students. Likewise, information must be gathered in a variety of ways from relevant sources and reported and used in ways that respect the limitations of the data. Assessment practices must be guided by sound educational research and evaluated on

an ongoing basis. Additionally, education partners must fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities within areas of their own expertise in order to sustain improvement within the system (Alberta Teachers Association, 2005).

Summary

Based on the research explored throughout this capstone study, it is evident that ongoing work in the area of educational assessment is needed. Stakeholders continue to be divided on their understanding of best practices to inform student achievement, and ongoing accountability measures tend to be misinterpreted, causing a certain level of mistrust in a system that has one common objective: to improve the quality of student achievement.

The first portion of Chapter 2 clarified the purpose of standardized assessment in education. External, standardized assessments provide stakeholders with a broad look at student achievement throughout the province and hold those within the education system accountable to certain standards. Although there is arguably room for improvement in these assessments, mainly to account for the diverse needs of all students within Alberta, there is also valuable data that can be beneficial to support ongoing improvement initiatives at the provincial and school levels.

The second part of Chapter 2 examined the positive and negative impacts that standardized assessment practices have on various educational stakeholders. Intentional focus was placed on students and teachers as they are the ones who are most influenced by such high-stakes testing. The research findings indicated that although standardized assessment practices can in some cases motivate students and teachers to better master the objectives required, in most cases, they had negative effects. Reports of increased stress and anxiety and the development of poor coping and teaching strategies were a few of the negative impacts discovered. Additionally,

persistent accountability measures and overemphasis of results from these exams caused many to develop mistrust against the policymakers who required them.

Finally, the last section of Chapter 2 explored the path toward a balanced assessment system, one in which the information needs of all stakeholders are respected and valued, but where emphasis is not given to one at the expense of another. In a balanced system, public accountability and transparency do not have to vie for precedence over the purposeful and impactful work done within the classroom on a daily basis. By identifying the roles and responsibilities of all educational stakeholders in the pursuit of improved student achievement, all can work collectively toward the same objective. Additionally, by following a straightforward action plan and recognizing the need to be adaptive in their practice, school leaders can support the ongoing pursuit of a balanced assessment system that empowers teachers and students to work together towards authentic learning experiences and inevitable improvements in overall student achievement and success.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

The purposes of this capstone study were to clarify the role of standardized assessment in education, examine the impacts these assessments have on educational partners, and provide school leaders with suggestions for balancing assessment systems within their local contexts. Assessment plays a critical role in the world of education (Alberta Education, 2010b; Wiliam, 2010); it is a complex component of an intricate system that must “inform decisions that both support and verify student learning” (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 19). In what can sometimes appear as competing priorities, various educational stakeholders require information that either informs teaching and learning or monitors the quality of education in the province. As Robinson (2011) articulated, “The public’s expectations for higher standards, more equitable performance on those standards, and accountability for making progress toward them are likely to persist” (p. 103); therefore, it is critical that stakeholders develop “better relationships and more effective communication” (Aitken et al., 2011, p. 205) to ensure the system functions effectively for all involved.

School leadership is an essential component to this process as research shows principals can have significant impacts on student achievement (Chappuis et al., 2010; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Whitaker, 2020); however, it is also important to consider that “collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership” (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012, p. 11). Truly, an assessment system that balances the information needs of all stakeholders, is used for the right purpose, and is always in service of improved student achievement, is a system that has the greatest benefits for all (Chappuis et al., 2010). Alberta Education (2010b) best articulated this desire:

Truly inclusive student-centered education requires that everyone involved in education accept collective responsibility for the success of every student, which begins in the early years and includes the development of competencies. Albertans have access to transparent, reliable, and consistent ways to gauge provincial and school authority success. Alberta Education provides school authorities with meaningful information and supports to assist them in identifying areas of success and for improvement. School authorities are responsible for their results and have the flexibility to determine how they can best address the diverse needs of students. Albertans hold the education system accountable for the investment in education. Thinking differently and engaging actively in collaborative efforts with Alberta Education, partners will further refine accountability measures and reporting mechanisms to assure Albertans that their investment in education meets their expectations and contributes to the province's prosperity. (p. 16)

Implications

This capstone study aims to bridge the gap in understanding of the role standardized assessment plays in the complex workings of a structured assessment system. Through this understanding, and under the guidance of assessment-literate school leaders, educators can focus their attention on the critical role various assessment practices play within a balanced system. "Polarized only by their variant beliefs in what is the best way to do the best thing for all involved" (Burger & Krueger, 2003, p. 15), those who work at the school level and those who are tasked with overseeing the workings of the ministry must work collaboratively to build a balanced system that accounts for the information needs of all stakeholders. Unfortunately, the consequences of this division have created a "culture surrounding assessment both within and around schools that has become increasingly and profoundly toxic and destructive" (Stiggins,

2017, p. 5). The work is never done in a system that strives for constant improvement, and a balanced assessment system, one that meets the information needs of all and aims to best support students, has strong positive implications.

“Increasing assessment literacy among stakeholders in the assessment process will help improve our schools, but only if efforts also target the policy-makers and legislators who make the important decisions about the format and structure of high-stakes accountability assessments” (Guskey, 2020, p. 13). In a balanced assessment system, policymakers can continue collecting data to monitor the quality of education along with reporting to the public. Although the use of standardized tests has remained similar in its design over the years, its explicit limitations have negative unintended impacts on students (De Castella et al., 2013; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Thompson, 1994). Additionally, standardized assessments themselves contain room for improvement to better meet the needs of the diverse learners within the system (Wiliam, 2010). The Alberta Teachers Association (2005) warned that

Without opportunities to take corrective action in the system, the pressures and controls exerted by the ministry can have, over the long-term, unintended adverse effects that actually limit students’ opportunity to learn, and the overall system’s capacity to achieve the goals of education. (p. 51)

By building assessment literacy in policymakers and those charged with designing and developing accountability measures, as well as working alongside other stakeholders to determine how information needs can complement one another, there is room for growth and improvement within the current system. Recent changes to the accountability framework in Alberta expanded it to engage more stakeholders and to include nonacademic standards, demonstrating a desire to take a more holistic approach to measuring the success of education in

this province (Alberta Education, 2010a, 2022c). When everyone understands the purpose of the various assessment strategies used throughout the system, there is less room for confusion, misunderstanding, and assumptions that can lead to the toxicity that Stiggins (2017) warned about.

As the primary investors in their children's education, parents play a pivotal role in monitoring progress throughout the academic journey. They have a right to know how their child is progressing through the system and if they are attaining the measures as set out by the ministry of education (Education Act, 2012). In a balanced system, the information needs of parents are considered at both at the classroom and provincial levels. Developing parents' assessment literacy supports them to become integral and active participants in a system working towards improving achievement for all learners.

Arguably, a balanced system of assessment has the most significant implications for those who work day-to-day with students. In a balanced system, both teachers and leaders understand that by measuring what they value, the focus will remain on the process of teaching and learning and include "the process of analyzing student responses and using the results to develop pedagogy and improve practice" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2005, p. 55). Accountability will indefinitely remain an important component of education (Robinson, 2011); however, when school leaders reinforce that "standardized tests measure only a part of what schools should be doing" and instead "focus on the behaviours that lead to success, not the beliefs that stand in the way of it" (Whitaker, 2020, p. 78), the results speak for themselves. Principals can have a significant influence in shifting the culture surrounding assessment in their buildings and their role is crucial to bridging the gaps that currently exist in the system as it is today.

In order to ensure optimal learning experiences that support the pursuit of success for all students, students themselves must be invited into assessment processes. As the primary stakeholders, they must be given every opportunity to develop self-efficacy skills and to become an active part of a balanced assessment system. Not only will the development of assessment literacy play a valuable role in supporting their academic development, but it will also contribute to their overall well-being (Stiggins, 2017). When classroom assessment practices are used to form students' academic growth and summarize their attainment of objectives, external, standardized assessments may not seem like such a high-stakes task, especially for those students who struggle. "Students judge the chances of their future success based on their interpretation of the success they have experienced in the past" (Stiggins, 2017, p. 71). To ensure success for all students, both classroom and external standardized assessments must be designed to account for the diversity in Alberta schools. Within a balanced system, all stakeholders, policymakers, parents, principals, teachers, and students see themselves as active participants in the assessment process.

Recommendations

All stakeholders have a collective responsibility to move forward together toward a balanced assessment system; however, as the research within this capstone study demonstrates, a school leader can have a significant impact on student achievement. "Most school leaders are motivated by the desire to make a difference to their students. They want to lift their students' achievement, increase their confidence, and give them opportunities they would never find elsewhere" (Robinson, 2011, p. 1). Despite the arguments about "whether certain assessments and tests measure what is important, the principle at stake here is willingness to judge educational leadership by its impact on the educational outcomes of students" (Robinson, 2011,

p. 4). When evidence supports gains in overall achievement, it should be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the system as a whole. Likewise, when the evidence generated suggests room for improvement, it must be used to guide the implementation of strategic action of the members within the system.

Establishing a balanced assessment system requires leaders to follow a structured action plan that will ensure success for all. An excellent resource to support leaders in this endeavour is the book *Assessment Balance and Quality: An Action Guide for School Leaders* by Chappuis et al. (2010). This practical guide walks school leaders through a five-part action plan of laying the foundation for a balanced assessment system, building the vision amongst the school community, establishing a path to assessment balance and quality, identifying required skills for assessment balance and quality, and planning for strategic action. This action plan and vision, along with my recommendations below, are meant to support school leaders in secondary schools create a balanced assessment system that meets the needs of all stakeholders.

To effectively establish a balanced system within their schools, leaders must begin by developing their own assessment literacy. Next, they need to invest time evaluating the current workings of the system within their own contexts and bring their staff together to create a shared vision of assessment within their school. Through a commitment to supporting ongoing professional learning and a willingness to use all educational leaders in the pursuit of this shared vision, a balanced system is possible. Finally, by bringing the primary stakeholders, the students, into the process as active participants in their educational journey, the system can truly meet the needs of everyone in meaningful ways.

Assessment Literacy for School Leaders

“If leaders are to achieve the expected results, they need access to up-to-date knowledge about teaching and learning and skill in using that knowledge to shape educationally sound administrative practices” (Robinson, 2011, p. 149). Building strong assessment literacy starts with the school leader as “improving leadership knowledge and skill is being leveraged as one more strategy directly aimed at raising student achievement” (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 3). To support change, they must possess a certain aptitude regarding “the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system, and the conditions required to achieve balance in local systems” (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 100). By understanding both the roles that classroom and external assessments play in the system and focusing improvement efforts on the summative and formative processes that teachers use daily, school leaders can support their teachers by leading a learning community towards the common goal of improved student achievement.

Leaders must “be able to reflect on [their] own attitudes and behaviour to better calibrate [their] interventions into the complex dynamics of organizations and communities” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 6). School leaders must spend time reflecting in order to recognizing their own personal values and beliefs surrounding assessment and work to navigate biases that may cloud their ability to balance the information needs of all stakeholders. Adaptive leaders possess the ability to be involved on the dance floor, observing and gauging the needs within the professional community first-hand, but also have a keen awareness of when to step back and onto the balcony for a look at the climate from a different perspective (Heifetz et al., 2009). The ability to weave in and out of the landscape provides leaders with an opportunity to gather information from various perspectives and determine needs accordingly. Additionally, by using resources that provide a framework for guiding conversations around assessment practices with

their staff, such as the Alberta Assessment Consortium's (n.d.) publication, *Supporting Professional Conversations About Assessment: An AAC Guide for School Leaders*, leaders can be better equipped to navigate this sensitive terrain. "The more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater will be their influence on student outcomes" (Robinson, 2011, p. 15).

Evaluate the Current System

The inner workings of the complex system of educational assessment are explicitly tied to the people to work within it. Based on the historical significance of standardized practices in education, educators themselves have very personal and emotionally laden views on its place within the system (Taras, 2010). Leaders must navigate these personal waters with sensitivity and hold space for the accompanying beliefs that individuals hold about assessment.

One distinctive aspect of leading adaptive change is that you must connect with the values, beliefs, and anxieties of the people you are trying to move. Being present in that way is tough to do unless your heart is part of the mix as well. Acts of leadership not only require access to all parts of yourself so that you can draw upon all of your own resources for will, skill, and wisdom; but to be successful, you also need to fully engage people with all these parts of yourself as well. (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 38)

Furthermore, holding space for the beliefs tied to assessment allows leaders to determine if the change they want to pursue is technical or adaptive. Technical change is addressed solely through behaviours, but adaptive change must be addressed by giving certain attention to the values and beliefs people hold about the circumstance being changed (Heifetz et al., 2009).

"Diagnosis and action begin with data collection and problem identification—the what, the why and the what next" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 6). Adaptive leaders are patient when

gathering the evidence necessary to determine the needs within an organization. It is imperative that they have a good sense of what is currently working well within the system and where the areas for improvement lie. Heifetz et al. (2009) recommended that leaders “resist the pressure to do something and spend more time diagnosing the problem, even if taking that much time feels excruciatingly uncomfortable” (p. 41). Through effective instructional leadership, principals can gauge the inner workings of the classroom, encourage professional collaboration, and adequately support the needs of their staff. Once issues are uncovered using the various forms of evidence gathered, school staff can begin the process of creating a shared vision and taking actionable steps towards positive change.

Establish a Shared Vision

“School leaders have an impact on student achievement primarily through their influence on teachers’ motivation and working conditions” (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012, p. 11). For a truly balanced system of assessment to exist within a school, all members of that professional community must share a common vision of what student success looks like and establish a specific plan on how to achieve it. Teachers and principals agree that one of the most helpful leadership practices is an explicit focus on school goals and clear expectations for student achievement (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). Research shows that misunderstandings and misuse create many of the issues that surround educational assessment (Aitken et al., 2011); however, through the development of a shared vision, teachers and leaders can clarify the purposes of assessment: support learning, report on achievements, or satisfy the demands for public accountability (Black, 1998). By establishing a common understanding of the purposes, teams can move forward in developing a shared understanding of clear learning targets, quality assessments, and the best practices that enable all students to achieve success. Nevertheless, the

power of shared language regarding assessment cannot be underestimated. Heifetz et al. (2009) argued that

Shared language is important in leading adaptive change. When people begin to use the same words with the same meaning, they communicate more effectively, minimize misunderstandings, and gain the sense of being on the same page, even while grappling with significant differences on the issues. (p. 9)

Shared language, shared behaviour, and a shared vision are possible only when the conditions that support collaboration and experimentation are encouraged and promoted.

Support Ongoing Professional Learning

The most significant way that a school leader can impact student achievement is by supporting ongoing professional learning in their building (Robinson, 2011). “Effective leadership of teacher professional learning involves using evidence about student learning to inform decisions about what professional learning is needed, whether it is working, who it is working for and when it should end” (Robinson, 2011, p. 109). A balanced assessment system requires constant analysis. To be effective, professional learning supports quality teaching when it follows a cycle inquiry and action, involving diagnosis, intervention, implementation, and evaluation (Robinson, 2011; see also Hattie et al., 2021). Principals support and encourage the growth of their teachers by making improved teaching and learning central to the priorities within the school (Whitaker, 2019). Within a culture of evidence-based practices, professional collaboration, and ongoing development, leaders can guide their teachers to effectively work within a balanced assessment system. Leaders are required to demonstrate strong instructional leadership skills, ensuring that every student has access to quality teaching and learning experiences (Alberta Education, 2018a). By building the capacity of teachers to respond to the

learning needs of all students using assessment practices that are fair, appropriate, and evidence-informed, school leaders become an active part of the balanced assessment system within their schools. This also enables them to develop leadership capacity within their staff so that others can facilitate learning through mentorship and collaboration.

Use All Educational Leaders

Leadership is, by its very nature, not just the purview of those with formal authority over others. One can also lead from a basis of expertise, ideas, and personality or character, and in principle, these sources of influence are open to anyone. This means that leadership by its very nature is distributed. (Robinson, 2011, p. 8)

Distributed leadership uses the knowledge and skills of many within an organization and “is performed by all teachers who have some responsibility, beyond their own classrooms, for the quality of learning and teaching” (Robinson, 2011, p. 82). Principals who actively work to build capacity in school-based teacher leaders, understand how important it is to share the role to progress towards higher levels of student achievement. Although decisions reside in the hands of principals, these leaders can actively support the goal of improved teaching and learning by sharing their knowledge and skills with their colleagues. By encouraging teachers to work together, visit one another’s classrooms, and witness effective assessment practices in action, and by providing collaborative time to discuss their learning, principals can work toward a strong student-centered approach to a balanced assessment system. Additionally, it is important to tap into the wealth of knowledge that exists outside of the school as well. For example, the Alberta Assessment Consortium is a respected not-for-profit organization that exists to support teachers and leaders to develop their capacity to advocate for sound assessment practices.

Involve Students

“Historically, students have been excluded from conversations about the very policies and practices that affect them” (Kelly, 2019, p. 1). To truly have a balanced assessment system in place, students must take an active role in assessment. If the purpose of assessment is largely to improve student achievement, it is the students who must sit in the driver seat. They must have a well-developed understanding of the various purposes each practice holds. As Wormeli (2018) stated, “We [educators] want to be advocates, not adversaries” (p. 164) with students, supporting them as they navigate their academic journey. Through explicit development of assessment literacy that helps students understand the function and processes assessment plays in the classroom and outside of it, students gain self-efficacy skills that enable them to use assessment as a tool to improve their own learning. Additionally, providing them with clear learning targets, a progressive succession of steps to attain those targets, feedback that is timely and targeted, and opportunities to experience and celebrate success, better equips students to actively engage with their schooling and own their learning. It is important to keep in mind that

Our true goals, student learning and maturation, are best achieved when we use effective practices that recognize that some students will take longer than others to learn, some students will need to process information more personally/vividly/consistently than others, and some students will need multiple attempts and get subsequent feedback to learn. (Wormeli, 2018, p. 149)

The stakes are high for these central educational stakeholders. “By involving students in their own assessment during learning, teachers can maximize student confidence, motivation, and achievement” (Chappuis et al., 2010, p. 68).

Suggestions for Further Research

Assessment in education is a vast topic within a complex organizational system, and it is but one facet of what contributes to the success of Alberta's students. This capstone study investigated the purpose of various assessments used within the system in the hopes of clarifying the roles they play in supporting student achievement. Both classroom and external assessments paint a certain picture of a student's educational journey. They exist along the same continuum and must be acknowledged as two ends of a spectrum instead of separate polarizing entities (Black, 1998). Further research on the specific processes involved in formative and summative assessment; the design of high-quality, authentic assessments; and improved training around data interpretation would significantly contribute to the overall assessment literacy of educational stakeholders. The findings of this study were focused on students and teachers in middle and high school, as they are most significantly influenced by external accountability measures. Although assessment looks different in elementary levels, research into quality assessment at all levels would be beneficial. Additionally, the scope could be expanded to include preservice teacher training and postsecondary entrance requirements, both of which demand attention to education surrounding effective assessment practices and processes (Aitken et al., 2011; Chappuis et al., 2010; Stiggins, 2002).

Conclusions

A balanced assessment system demands attention at both the local and provincial levels as it is an element of education that has significant impacts on all invested stakeholders. Without adequately developed understandings of the purpose and process of various forms of assessment, there is significant risk of misuse, misunderstanding, and overall negative association with this integral part of ensuring student achievement (Alberta Teachers Association, 2004). Clarifying

the role and intended use of data gathered from assessment practices is crucial in eliminating misconceptions that inevitably lead to poor practices. Educational stakeholders all have a vested interest in the same outcomes; they want to ensure that the students in this province are receiving quality education and achieving overall success as they strive to “gain the knowledge and skills to form the foundation for successful and fulfilling lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (Government of Alberta, 2020, p. 1). Through provincial accountability measures, this goal is carefully monitored, providing appropriate feedback to address issues as they arise. Unfortunately, the unintended consequences of high-stakes assessment have impacted students and teachers alike (Aitken et al., 2011; Burger & Kreuger, 2003; Cairns, 2021; Feldman, 2020; Jones & Egle, 2004; Kelly, 2019; Klinger & Luce-Kalper, 2007; Kohn 2000; Stiggins, 2017; Thompson, 1994), resulting in a system that is laden with negative emotions and a skewed perception of the role assessments play in supporting the overall objective.

School leaders have a significant responsibility in shifting the thinking associated with assessment and actively working to develop balanced assessment systems within their schools. By creating a culture that values the people within it, one that acknowledges individuals and focuses on impacting behaviours that best support improved student learning and achievement, leaders can build bridges between what happens within the classroom and outside of it.

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