

## What Are You Assessing?

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All educators have had numerous questions regarding what advantages there are to student's learning. Research has aided us to find answers to some of those questions related to the physical, mental, social and spiritual environments.



Questions such as: what role do emotions play in the learning process; how does sleep help memory; how do parents enhance learning environments; how are students hurt by rewards and, are there ways to measure authentic learning? These are just a few of the questions that have been raised in educational circles because of the dreams teachers have for their student's success.

In this article I would like to spend time on possible directions that can be taken in authentic assessment. One of the most hotly debated topics related to assessment has been the Provincial Achievement Test and relevancy of what they are really measuring. To understand the purpose of assessment we need to understand what it is that educators are evaluating. Learning must take place so the measurement of it can mean something. Learning is defined as the ability to gain knowledge, understanding or skill by study or experience.

As we look at this definition in context, a question arises as to what is determined when a test is given on a particular concept. Do we test to what is relevant to the brain so learning can build on what we have learned or do we need to broaden our evaluation techniques? If we are going to do justice to the assessment of learning, we must ask the hard question as to "why" a learner's performance falls short of the expectations we may have for them?

We need to consider why Billy did not do well in his reading skills evaluation, not just assume that because his test indicated that he was reading below average therefore he must be a poor reader. We must take the time to dig deeper into Billy's learning processes. When we do that, we might find some amazing discoveries. We may discover that though Billy may have a weakness in public performance, he may in fact read faster and with greater retention than 90 percent of his peers. Surprising?

Research shows that there are a number of factors as to why certain students do not do well with such an assessment as public reading. Research has also determined that boys generally develop verbal skills later than girls of the same age. Billy may also be under-challenged, or perhaps the material chosen may lack meaning for him; or he may be afraid of being ridiculed or punished for making a mistake. Our present assessment system in many schools does not take into consideration the above listed factors when grading a child's performance.

An even more unfortunate scenario is that this misdiagnosis will place Billy into the “slower reading” group. We can only envision the negative emotions that can be associated by such a placement. The consequences of our superficial assessment may have long term, if not permanent affects all because we missed what was really happening in Billy’s normal development.

Research also points out “normal development” is a key concept that should not be overlooked since normal development in children varies by as much as three years. So simply speaking, a female student in a grade two class may be as much as three years ahead of Billy in verbal abilities.

There are a number of these pitfalls that we as teachers at times overlook. I would like to explore the specifics of these assessment pitfalls in future articles. I would like to close by leaving you with a list of mistakes to avoid as teachers. Consider carefully your assessment strategies for the Billy’s and Susan’s of your classrooms.

**Pitfall # 1**

New trends towards setting higher standards of achievement without a provision for adequate resources.

**Pitfall # 2**

All brain development in children happens at the same age.

**Pitfall # 3**

Short term testing of concepts ignores how the brain learns.

**Pitfall # 4**

Most evaluation ignores the building blocks for future learning skills.

**Pitfall # 5**

Most testing does not take in to account real world applications.

The goal of all educators in the 21st century should be “*to make what’s important more measurable rather than making what’s measurable more important.*” (Jensen)

**Resources:**

- Jensen, E. (1995) Brain-Based Learning: The new Science of Teaching and Training. San Diego, CA. The Brain Store Publishing.