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Using Assessments Thoughtfully

The Case for Confidence

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Sound assessment practices can increase students' competence and achievement.

Confidence separates those who persist from those who give up. When students have confidence, when they believe they'll eventually be able to achieve, they can learn almost anything. Without confidence, regardless of how on point a teacher's instruction is, learning stops.

Understandably, teachers tend to anchor their efforts to raise student achievement in good pedagogy and instruction. Educators often compartmentalize any focus on students' dispositions or emotions into a separate program, kept at arms' length from the teaching of curricular standards. This leaves students feeling as though their potential academic success has little to do with how they think or feel or how they approach learning. Our foremost job as teachers, however, is to develop, maintain, and enhance students' confidence as learners. The rest is just the (albeit very important) details.

Assessment practices significantly affect whether students develop confidence or whether they decide that they can't learn, no matter how they try. Over the years, I've recognized the centrality of confidence and have changed my assessment approach accordingly.

When I taught math at McNicoll Park Middle School in Penticton, British Columbia, I became increasingly frustrated with my limited ability to engage several specific students in my math classes. Searching for something to add to my repertoire to enhance engagement, I discovered research on formative assessment and sound grading practices, including relevant examples and tools. After implementing these research-based practices, I experienced positive results—but the most important outcome of adopting formative assessment was an unanticipated shift in my students' attitudes, exemplified by a student I'll call Chris.

Chris, an 8th grade boy, was popular and social, and he placed learning far down on his continuum of priorities. His attendance was spotty, his success in math was minimal, and his behavior was increasingly challenging.

One morning, students were engaging in a self-assessment process. I had begun unpacking my curricular standards into specific elements, indicators, and targets and sharing these with students. Students were reviewing these elements and checking off which ones they felt they'd mastered. As Chris went through his list, he turned to the student next to him and said, "I guess I do know some stuff in math."

I was floored. I hadn't anticipated that implementing research-validated assessment and grading practices would shift the attitudes of struggling students. Many students who'd been ready to give up exhibited the same reaction as Chris. And although Chris didn't become a straight-A student, his level of engagement dramatically rose. He realized that he didn't "suck at math." And I realized that I was on to something—the overlap between effective assessment strategies and student confidence.

Why Confidence Matters

Discussions about student confidence can easily go sideways. A focus on developing confidence can be misunderstood as a focus on making every student feel good regardless of results. Sometimes people infer that developing confidence is about lowering expectations to a point where it's impossible for the student to fail. Neither of these actions creates true confidence. We should develop our students' self-esteem but remember that self-esteem is insufficient for success in academic subjects.

After reading Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book, *Confidence*, I understood three important points. First, when a student can't see any of his or her weaknesses—or any of his or her strengths—that learner will be overconfident or underconfident. Unless confidence is based on evidence of success, it may represent false hope. Kanter (2004) defines confidence as grounded optimism nestled in the "sweet spot between arrogance and despair" (p. 8).

Second, I began to view students' experiences in school through the lens of winning and losing streaks. Kanter writes that "failure and success are not episodes, they are trajectories" (p. 9). Each assignment, assessment, or learning activity a student experiences is shaped by previous learning events. My priority shifted to setting my students up for a positive growth trajectory. Third, and most important, I learned that confidence was the key to developing "stick-to-it-iveness" with regards to learning among struggling students.

I began to consider whether each of my assessment and grading practices contributed to students' confidence or raised students' anxiety. Anxiety interferes with memory, attention, and concentration (Chan, 2001). If a practice raised anxiety, I changed it or stopped using it. I had been using punitive grading practices like zeros and late penalties. My revelation about confidence sealed the fate of those practices. To use such practices, I now believe, unravels most of teachers' good work.

Practices That Boost Confidence

Assessment practices that help students believe in themselves are rooted in a formative assessment approach. In this approach, teachers look at students' work to determine where each learner is in terms of the learning targets, but not to grade the work. Although this approach isn't new, our understanding of how formative assessment is linked to attitudes about learning is. Let's consider six practices that lift kids' confidence.

1. Unpack curricular standards.

Unpacking curricular standards serves a dual purpose. First, it allows teachers to precisely plan the sequence of instruction and gain greater clarity about what assessment results represent. Just as a coach must examine the specific elements of technique when an athlete throws a football or serves a volleyball, teachers need to be able to examine the specific elements of learning. For example, rather than simply telling a student to make a more effective argument, a teacher could zoom in on whether the student's point of view is muddy, her reasons aren't clear, or her proof is incomplete.

Second, such unpacking gives students intimate access to the curricular standards, and this clarity boosts confidence. Standards are written for teachers; they often leave students in a fog about what they're supposed to learn. Unpacking curricular standards identifies the foundational knowledge, skills, and targets within individual standards or clusters. A student's confidence will grow as he realizes he isn't simply "bad at making an argument." Rather, he can see that his point of view and reasoning are effective, but his proof is unclear or mismatched to his position. Unpacking allows students to understand where they're skilled and where they still need to improve.

2. Infuse assessment into instruction.

Good coaches are always assessing their players, evaluating every throw, catch, set, shot, and rebound against the standard of excellence. Feedback comes in real time. In the same way, assessment becomes instruction when the lines between assessment, instruction, and feedback are blurred; when a learning activity (like having students answer a question on exit slips) is anchored in the intended learning; and when the results of that activity elicit an immediate instructional response from the teacher (Wiliam, 2011). Students' competence and confidence grow as they receive specific, immediate information on how to correct deficiencies and solidify strengths.

3. Balance formative and summative assessment.

It's odd that some teachers understand the difference between practice sessions and games in sports (when children return home from a soccer practice, parents never ask what the score was) yet insist that everything students produce be graded. A balance between formative and summative assessment replicates the healthy distinction between practice and games. And just as there are more practices than games, there should be more formative assessment than summative.

Using more formative than summative assessment was a major shift for my students. Their anxiety dramatically lessened when they realize that every mistake wouldn't cost them in my grade book, and their willingness to try significantly increased. Just as soccer practice is for improvement, formative assessment is for improving students' abilities to meet the standards they will

need to demonstrate mastery of on summative assessments.

4. Give effective feedback.

Effective feedback—feedback that's immediate, specific, accessible, actionable, transparent, and ongoing—is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Wiggins, 2012). Feedback has the greatest effect when it's frequent, delivered in relation to the intended learning, and addresses the gap between where the students' learning is now and where it needs to be. Successful feedback has two other characteristics.

Good feedback isn't "too much." A high volume of feedback can leave students feeling overwhelmed, especially when they have little time to act on that feedback. The ultimate purpose of feedback is to have students take corrective action. Overloading them with tons of feedback is counterproductive and diminishes their confidence in addressing learning shortages.

Good feedback shows the way. Students need to see what they need to do next along their road to achieving standards. The feedback loop between students and teachers need not always be an epic event. Tell them what they need to do to improve, provide them time to do it, then tell them the next step, and so on. Feedback should always lean forward, making it obvious to students what's next in their learning (Wiliam, 2011). A teacher could say either, "You didn't use any transitions between your body paragraphs" or "Now let's work on establishing some smooth transitions that link each of your paragraphs." Both comments address the same concern, but the latter leans forward.

Although we must always assess student work according to standards, every piece of feedback needn't reflect how far students are from the end goal. Telling a student exactly how far away she really is from mastering a standard may be demotivating. If, for instance, a student is at a 2 on scale of 1–10, it might be best to at first give her feedback that focuses on moving her up to a 5.

5. Make students think.

Student confidence can waver if kids spend their day as passive recipients of their teacher's feedback. Students need to be *thinking*. If teacher feedback exclusively provides the answers, active involvement by students is less likely. And without reflecting on their work, students are unlikely to make the comparison between the expected standards and the work they're producing.

With *metacognitive feedback*, teachers give students cues, questions, or prompts that get them to think about the process of learning as much as the correctness of responses (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012; Wiliam, 2011). A teacher might pose a question that asks a student to consider how he came to his conclusion rather than simply indicating whether that conclusion was correct or incorrect, sufficient or incomplete. Or a teacher could highlight a few sentences in a paragraph of student writing for that student to reconsider, but not indicate any specific changes to be made. The goal is to keep learning moving forward and to have students continually reengage with their work.

6. Develop a standards-based mind-set for grading.

Schools and districts are at different places in terms of using standards-based grading; many schools continue to report traditional letter grades. But all educators can develop a standards-based mind-set, which has more to do with how we think about evidence of learning than how we report it.

The standards-based mind-set is about accuracy. Practices like late penalties and zeros contribute to negatively distorted grades, whereas practices like extra credit contribute to positively distorted grades (O'Connor, 2011). Inaccurate grades are misleading; they leave students feeling more or less proficient than they actually are. Because students' emotional reactions to the prospect of being graded are unavoidable, the more teachers factor out emotional elements unrelated to the standards, the more our grades will support student confidence. Ask yourself, for example, do late penalties contribute to students' confidence or to their anxiety?

One practice educators *should* adopt is to base grades on the most recent evidence of student learning, which not only makes

grading more accurate but also maintains or increases student confidence. Students earn full credit for what they've accomplished. This approach also honors the process of learning and the reality that some students take a little longer to learn. Using the mean average in grading, in contrast, works against accuracy (O'Connor, 2011) and reduces student confidence because the resulting grade is usually much lower than the most recent results would show.

Reassessment deserves special mention here. Many educators think of reassessment as simply hitting a reset button to give students another shot. But a "do-over" approach will not decrease anxiety levels; the likely result will be a replication of the previous unsatisfactory result. What truly reduces anxiety is the opportunity to learn from mistakes; engage in targeted, more intensive learning; reach a new level of proficiency; and then demonstrate that new level. *That's* reassessment.

When I used assessment methods that promoted confidence, my students knew that reassessment came with the responsibility to use the feedback they received, target their learning going forward, and close the gaps between their current level and the standard. True reassessment sends the message that learning is never final, that we can learn from our mistakes and keep improving.

Creating Possibility

Developing real confidence—not inflated self-esteem—is about gaining competence. Although reducing students' anxiety will not alone produce competence and achievement gains (Hattie, 2009), it will positively affect students' belief that they can eventually succeed—and help them persist when facing obstacles. Through these strategic uses of assessment and grading practices, we can create an environment of hope and possibility.

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