REDESIGNING ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING: IMPACTS STUDENT LEARNING AND SOCIAL VALUES

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Alberta, a province in Canada with an educational ministry dedicated to student success has adopted three key components to drive its new curricular direction. The young adult graduating from high school in Alberta will be an **engaged** thinker and **ethical** citizen with an **entrepreneurial** spirit.

To augment this vision, the ministry is currently designing a curriculum of student competency; raising new questions about the role of student assessment in this new direction of education. Calgary Girls' School, a public charter school in Alberta, is tasked with leading educational research in the province and with demonstrating pedagogical innovation. This lighthouse school has taken the lead in the area of assessment vis-a-vis conceptualization and building student competencies.

In the fall of 2012, the school embarked on an arduous journey, whose genesis was found in a disconnect between a pedagogy of collaborative inquiry fostered through conversation and exploration; and a term report card which indicated student performance in percentage grades. The **new design for assessment and reporting** at Calgary Girls' School is established in a technology platform called Edmodo, a platform where students upload work, teachers provide formative feedback, and parents engage in the daily authentic learning of their children. Student work can be presented in a variety of digital modalities including multi media.

The paper to be presented will address the impetus for the new design, the journey of the process and the necessary conversations to address not only the changes that took place in the school's assessment and reporting practice; but also the larger **social implications of changing our society to one that embraces a growth mindset.**

A social mindset that values a paint by number approach to assessment of student learning over contextualized authentic learning experiences is a final challenge that will be addressed in this paper.

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The purpose of this paper is to present the broader perspective that a journey in assessment reform must take and to examine the social connotations that are linked to assessment and its impact on students' learning. Using a charter school in Canada as a case study, we document the changes in the whole-school assessment practices from summative assessment of student performance in percentages to alternative assessments of student performance, which emphasize students' understanding of concepts, social norms, teacher pedagogy and values of learning. In this paper, we share the initial experience of the charter school in assessment reform and bring to question the previous practices of assessment and reporting on student learning. We hope that our experience encourages and supports other educators to have the courage to change and move society forward for the benefit of children.

The context of the experience is an all girls school in Canada comprising students from grades 4 to 9.The grade 4,5,6 students are taught as homogenous classes and the upper grades (i.e., grades 7-9) have partner teachers, one being math, one being science and the other humanities. The school program is designed to have a focus on teaching through conceptual understanding, which allows teachers and students to learn through inquiry (Erickson, 2008). In June of 2012 eighty percent of the grade 6 students received a grade of at least 80% on their year-end report card yet the provincial assessment in June reflected a far different picture (Alberta Education, 2012). All grade nine students were successful in their completion of their year and again a review of results presented a different picture (Alberta Education, 2012). It is noted that student performance on a one-day assessment at the end of June does raise its own concern of assessment practice; however given that the standards of measurement include a provincial sample sets a standard for equality of measurement. Given that the gap between student performance on the June assessments and their year-end evaluative mark based on teacher designed assessments and a school wide prescribed report card, was significant for more than a few students, there did exist a need for discussion regarding the cause for such a difference in the results, and what the school could do to narrow this gap.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Ellen Key (1900) introduced her work The Century of the Child (1900) that proposed change to the educational system to meet the needs of the future. Embarking on a venture to affect future education, she believed that she could impact the world through education. The Swedish author and early representative of the international reform pedagogy movement shared a focus with fellow reformers such as Maria Montessori, Georg Kerschensteiner and John Dewey on the needs of children to socialize and learn through activity. In her work, Key (1900) studied the role of the child in relation to the earlier 1900's family; and the trends of education at that time with a passionate plea for child- centered pedagogy; and eugenics as a science to improve humanity's quality of life. Her final chapter dedicated a portion of the writing to *The School of the Future* which focused on an elimination of the use of fear to teach but rather to rejoice at deviation from the norm, which evidently compares to inquiry centred learning in current pedagogy. It is now 2013 and Alberta schools are embarking on curriculum reform that embraces engaged thinkers, ethical citizens and an entrepreneurial spirit (Alberta Education, 2010). Yet final reporting of student performance, senior high school programming and entrance to post secondary programs remain subject to an objective numerical value which promotes fear to fail and a belief that all society members understand the qualitative value to which the number represents.

In 2012, the teaching staff and leadership team of Calgary Girls' School identified assessment to improve student learning as a goal for professional growth. Questions were raised about learning. The hierarchy of a percentage grading scale was centered on fear and fear of failure, which then eliminated any willingness for students to explore their learning and to take risks. Risk taking is key to discovery and inquiry (McCombs and Whisker, 1997). Teachers were limited in their ability to deliver a strong program of inquiry and to develop learners with a strong growth mindset. When they designed rubrics, which promoted the values of exploration, these then had to be deduced to a numerical value for reporting. When providing students with extensive feedback to grow in their learning, this feedback was negated in search of the numerical value and students did not connect the feedback to improving their learning. The value of a growth mindset that orients students to learning, and that has them believe in and value effort; and understand that mistakes and setbacks are inevitable (Dweck, 2006), was lost because of the power of the value that students and their parents had placed on percentage grades. The development of pedagogy and curriculum were progressing in opposing directions to the prescribed process for reporting and students were caught in the middle. Students wanted to achieve well but they did not have the capacity to improve their learning because they had been cultured in a percentage, marks-based environment, where the only answer to a poor result was to study harder; or to label the test as too difficult; or the student as not prepared. Such assessment practice reflects the failure of using assessment to make every child want to learn and feel able to learn (Stiggins, 2002). It will have adverse effects on students' motivation in the long run. In an all girls environment, the anxiety was escalated because it is the nature of girls to want to please (Simmons, 2009). Girls wanted good marks. When they did not get good marks, they displayed anxiety and this upset parents. Parents in their desire to advocate for their daughters would challenge teachers and, having been educated themselves in the very same cultural environment of percentages and marks, were too disinterested in feedback. Teachers, who by professional nature are not necessarily in roles that handle conflict well, succumbed to the cultural pressure and provided assessments which lacked feedback and were of little rigour, all for the aim that all students could achieve well. Learning, challenging, exploring and all of the competencies necessary for our students to be successful in the 21st Century were abandoned because of a lack of support of what education knew to be best.

If we are to reflect on this very cyclical situation and apply it to what we observe in many educational institutions, is it likely that there are students who have the competencies to be very successful in post secondary education and even in the work force, who are ultimately eliminated because they did not have the ability to make the percentages necessary on test day? Is society delivering its best or allowing its best to deliver? What is an 80%? Is a long-standing cultural standard for reporting of student performance breeding mediocrity in our education system and entrepreneurial world? Because of massive numbers of students applying for programs and dreaming of success, are institutional and government leaders looking to an elusive numerical value, to which there is no real standard; only one that has assumed meaning? This was to be the work at Calgary Girls' School. Even though the school knew that culturally there would exist many challenges to designing rubrics for reporting student learning that engaged students and parents in learning, assessment, feedback and evaluation; it was an important step to take for education. If education is to move forward and truly prepare students for their future, then the mold of percentage reporting and its connotations must be smashed and redesigned to set students up for a dynamic future.

The school staff reviewed the work of Butler (1988) that measured intrinsic motivation versus ego-involving evaluation and its effect on student learning and related their current findings in working with middle school girls to the participants in the study (Butler, 1988). Butler (1988) provided focus for the staff as they attempted to help students and parents value formative assessment and accept feedback to improve learning, which then meant that learning was an ongoing process rather than finite. Staff members worked tirelessly providing feedback to help students who had identified the percentage mark as validation of performance and validation of their level of success as people. Many students described the percentage number as their only motivator. The staff unanimously and courageously agreed to move forward with assessment that did not provide any numerical value for the students, knowing that they were in for a very tough challenge. The journey, at times rocky, began to have staff members question their assessment practices and engage in deep worthwhile conversations about identifying what was being assessed and moving assessment from what is known to what is understood. These conversations led to stronger program development, and the redesign of assessment for conceptual understanding began to emerge. A new question arose, how could thinking be measured? David Berliner, in a chapter titled *The Incompatibility of High-Stakes Testing and the Development of Skills for the Twenty-First Century* (Marzano, 2010, p. 113) emphasizes an argument agreed upon by many educational practitioners that testing measures only surface level learning and basic competencies. The concepts of high-stakes testing and the deep understandings needed for twenty-first century learning are incongruent. Marzano further argues that high-stakes testing may limit learning and reduce the achievement potential. Many researchers are congruent in their thinking that the educational institution of the twenty-first century must be committed to preparing citizens who will be socially functional, masters of dominant information, and economically productive (McLeod, 2010). Over and over communication skills, critical thinking, and risk taking arise as dominant characteristics for future success. Leadership must evaluate whether their current school practises including assessment, foster such characteristics or hamper them. Furthermore, do the political systems in which their schools operate foster the same characteristics or is their work for administrators to do in lobbying for what is right for their students and schools to higher political levels? Curriculum planning, implementation and delivery as well as student assessment will require deep rethinking.

As the journey progressed, the societal issues became the focus. Questions about high school and post secondary admissions worried parents and senior students. The mindset shift from results to learning was a very difficult adjustment for parents. Lengthy conversations supported by research from Alfie Kohn, Thomas Guskey, and the Butler (1988) study provided an academic understanding yet the strength of the heart overpowered and the realization of the true depth of this paradigm shift for education became prevalent. Parents who had asked to be engaged in their children's education (Alberta Education, 2010) were recognizing the demand of the commitment. They did not have the time to participate in their daughters' online portfolios and review summative assessment feedback. They believed that they had comfort in a numerical value and that it had meaning. Yet, when asked to describe this meaning, they intellectually agreed that it did not exist. It was what it had always been; what they had always known. Sadly, school enrolment declined as parents chose to put their children in a system in which they found comfort even though they agreed that an 80% at one school was not the same measure at another school. Charter schools in Alberta are expected to lead with innovative practice and our work as

a leading school to educate society about assessment and learning was important and it had to be done through gentle conversations, empathetic listening and a firm nudge toward the new.

　　　Communication of student learning to engage all stakeholders was a key component of this process. The school adopted Edmodo as its platform for communicating student learning and feedback. Student work was uploaded to this password-protected platform and teachers would upload the student rubric for assessment along with providing feedback to support the work. Classes used Edmodo as their platform for home- school communication hoping to initiate parent use of this new platform, and encourage the use of technology for some. Initially, both formative and summative assessment were uploaded and visible to both students and parents, as it was believed that transparency would engage parents in the process and help them to become supportive of the change in reporting. The Alberta Government round table discussions to inform their Inspiring Education document (2010) had indicated a parent desire to be engaged in their children's education and as a charter school, the school felt obligated to be supportive of parents. The revelations of the shift to Edmodo were surprising. The school quickly realized that it had not prepared students for the open communication that the new platform would reveal and that while parents voiced a desire to be engaged in their children's education, they were not prepared to take the time necessary for this engagement. Teaching practise was also exposed in a new dimension. Students became angry and frustrated because in their mind the growth mindset was not validating. Students value effort as a negative connotation, relating effort to performance; if they must put effort into their learning, then they must not be successful as learners (Dweck, 2006). Further, if the work is hard, they must not be very good at it. Teachers worked tirelessly to provide strong, guided feedback to help students improve as learners and students did not value the feedback because they were cultured to believe that the feedback meant they were not doing well. Students cried out for a single percentage grade that would validate them, and as they claimed, motivate them. They claimed that they were no longer engaged in their learning, yet daily performance and teacher observation clearly indicated that this was not true. Students who struggled with learning were the first to be supportive of the new approach to assessment. No longer did they measure themselves up against those who were stronger achievers or hide their results so that no one would judge them. Teachers quickly re-evaluated the place for formative assessment in Edmodo because when parents became a part of the learning process, students became less willing to take risk and perhaps fail in their learning journey. For families who embraced change and learning, the conversations were rich but for many the demand of the engagement was far too cumbersome. Parents were very quickly seeing the amount of time that participating in their children's learning required and some felt imposed upon by the school to engage through Edmodo. Parents wanted a report three times a year that told them how their child was learning. Parents who were engaging were astounded at the inquiry learning process. They envisioned page upon page of rote learning, rote assignments and a mark book filled with numbers that when calculated and averaged arrived at a numerical value that determined student performance and in the mind of the parent, all of the assessments were summative. Rationally, students, parents and teachers knew that student learning was much more profound than a percentage grade attached to a subject: however our ingrained cultural knowledge validated that which makes little sense. An astronomical number of hours needed to be spent in courageous and caring conversations to alter a mindset.

And so the journey continues. The work now becomes refining the process. "Ready-fire-aim", the metaphor to capture change process coined by Peters and Waterman (1982) and reiterated by Fullan (2011) sets the direction for assessment at Calgary Girls' School. This current fall, the demographic has changed. The students know that their assessment will be focused on growth and individual performance and that there is always room for improvement; that failing is part of learning and that if we never take a risk to fail, we never take a risk to discover something remarkable. Parents who have chosen to continue with the school are committing to active engagement through student portfolios. They know that their participation in their daughters' learning is an expectation and they trust the education delivered by the expert professionals in the classrooms. Teachers are able to focus their program design and energy on strong conceptual understanding, which will result in assessment redesign to tap students' conceptual understanding and better meet the needs of all learners. A measure of confidence for all is the success of our grade nine students who entered into more than twenty different high schools in the city of Calgary and surrounding area. Each of our students is in their program of choice and their early feedback is that they feel confident in their new settings and appreciate their time at the Calgary Girls' School. We begin our collaborative research project to lead the school into thoughtful rubric design and assessment practices that emulate a growth mindset. The Calgary Board of Education and The Calgary Catholic Board of Education, two of the largest school boards in the province of Alberta, are embarking on reporting reform to eliminate the use of percentage evaluation at the elementary and middle school level much to the disappointment of those families who had chosen to leave our school. The point is, as education recognizes the importance of student competency and builds a structure for the future engaging students as thinkers who are ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit (Alberta Education, 2010), students become empowered; in control of their own destiny and all are equal. McLeod (2010) pleas with educational leaders:

> The people who are responsible for creating these new schooling paradigms, leading us forward into whatever this new learning environment is going to look like, the ones that have a formal authority, whether it be administrative or legislative in terms of making the stuff happen are often some of the least knowledgeable people about the digital and global world and if the leaders don't get it, it's not going to happen (McLeod, Speech to American School of Bombay, February 2010).

It is imperative for educational leaders to sense urgency to get it right:
> The media-smart youth of today find it quite ordinary to communicate, share, buy and sell, exchange, create, meet, coordinate, evaluate, play games to learn, socialize, fantasize whole new lives through avatars, search, analyze, report, program digital devises, and grow up as remarkably well-connected, fantasy-using, action-oriented kids. But they attend schools that look as if they exist in the nineteenth century-not the twenty-first century (Berliner as cited in Marzano, 2010, p. 138).

Key (1900) believed in the impact that her vision could have on the future of world education and similarly, the courage of the work at Calgary Girls' School has initiated changes in assessment practices and reporting that over time will be influential in systemic assessment reform.

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