Research Note

Assessment and Grading Practices in Outreach Schools

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Classroom assessment, and formative assessment in particular, has garnered much attention in assessment research over the last 15 years. Specifically, this research speaks to the benefits of formative assessment in improving student learning and achievement (e.g., Shepard, 2000; Wiliam, 2007). Assessment practices have typically been researched in traditional school and classroom contexts, but as student needs evolve, there are an increasing number of students seeking educational opportunities in on-line, alternative, and outreach school environments. While research in these contexts exists (e.g., Barbour & Hill, 2011; Grossman & Kanu, 1999; Shields & Larocque, 1998), a specific focus on assessment practices in these contexts is absent.

This paper reports on a study exploring summative and formative assessment practices in outreach schools in Alberta, which are described as providing "an educational alternative for junior and senior high school students who, due to individual circumstances, find that traditional school settings do not meet their needs" (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 1). Two questions guided the research: 1) What assessment practices are being utilized in outreach schools in Alberta, and 2) Do these practices reflect appropriate assessment practices as described in the research literature (see Brookhart & Nitko, 2008; Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991; Nichols, Meyers, & Burling, 2009)?

An online survey was administered to 85 outreach teachers across Alberta, with 66 surveys fully completed. Respondents were from both rural and urban outreach schools from 36 school divisions. The survey consisted of 21 selected response questions, with the opportunity for respondents to provide further clarification to their responses to each question. Survey questions focused on program demographics (e.g., "How many teachers are on site dedicated to your school's outreach program?," and "What is the average number of students enrolled in your school's outreach program?") and information pertaining to the process used to evaluate student progress (e.g., "In general, how are outreach student's final grades calculated in the outreach program?," and "Are students able to resubmit assignments/tests/quizzes/projects based on feedback given by the teachers?"). Descriptive statistics were calculated from the selected response questions, and anecdotal information provided by the respondents was used alongside the selected response question data to provide further elaboration on the numerical data.

Results from the survey indicate that the types of summative assessments used consisted mostly of assignments, tests, and final exams, with projects and other assessment tools used less frequently. Sixty-one percent of respondents indicated that in general, assignments, projects, other tests, and a final examination were used to calculate students' final grade. Twenty-two percent of respondents indicated that final grades consisted of assignments and a final exam.

Additional comments indicated that although there was some consistency in the types of summative tasks students performed, teachers varied both the tasks themselves and their weighting based on the course and the student. The most frequent comment from respondents regarding the types and weighting of each summative task was that "every course is different," with different assessment tasks and weightings used. The use of these assignments, tests, and final exams as the main sources of summative information is not surprising due to the nature and structure of outreach schools where learning is individualized and students are taking courses at their own pace. Consequently, opportunities for other types of assessment, such as debates, presentations, and class discussions, were not present.

Survey questions also focused on the type of feedback that students received on their summative tasks. Feedback on student work most frequently appeared in the form of written or verbal teacher feedback, and/or grades. Peer feedback was utilized rarely. The frequency of verbal feedback was dependent on student attendance, learning preference, personal factors, and past success of verbal feedback. As one teacher wrote, the frequency of verbal feedback, "depends on how often [the student is] in the building". If a student does not physically attend or hand in any assignments, he/she is not able to receive any kind of feedback. Written feedback was only given when assignments were handed in, or when exams were completed, which would vary between students. As a consequence, the frequency of written feedback varied by student. Sixty-eight percent of the verbal feedback and 72% of the written feedback were intended by the teacher to be both formative and summative in nature.

Student marks in a course were based on a combination of tests, quizzes, assignments, projects, and final exams. In addition, each activity was weighted almost equally, with an emphasis on assignments being reported. A number of respondents explained that the final grade calculations also varied from subject to subject and different courses would have different weightings. Attendance itself was not included in course grading schemes. However, some participants explained that, while attendance may not be directly calculated as part of a grade, higher attendance rates usually corresponded to higher rates of success for students.

Ninety-seven percent of respondents stated that students were able to redo summative assessments. The anecdotal comments clarified that the opportunity for students to redo and resubmit assessments was not a 'given' but depended on the circumstances of the student and the course. Teacher comments also explained that the opportunity to resubmit an assignment or examination was usually a collaborative decision between the student and the teacher in which the issues were identified before presenting the student with an opportunity to resubmit. Every respondent indicated that students had opportunities throughout the course to change or improve their marks on a given course either through re-doing an assignment or examination or through doing additional assignments or projects. This process varied depending on student circumstances or the course.

What this research suggests is that teachers in outreach schools are providing students with opportunities to receive both verbal and written feedback on their work and to redo and resubmit assignments. Outreach teachers provide summative assessment options for students depending on the course the student is taking and specific student circumstances in an attempt to meet the needs of students. The assessment practices of outreach teachers reflect many of the elements of effective assessment practice (Black & Wiliam, 2010; Joint Advisory Committee, 1993; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004) and elements of effective teaching (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011). Further research into outreach schools and the assessment and teaching practices that they employ is necessary.

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