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# TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO MANDATED ASSESSMENT: CASE STUDIES OF TEACHERS' ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

By

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ABSTRACT

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO MANDATED ASSESSMENT

By

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Since the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools and teachers are under greater pressure than ever to ensure that students meet outcome expectations. A key component of the Act uses standardized, state-level assessments to measure student achievement and to hold schools accountable for improving it. This study sought to understand how teachers make sense of the complex, multi-layered context of demands and expectations emanating from the NCLB as they construct their assessment practices. The study asked, what factors seem most salient in teachers' decision making about their assessment practice?

This study applied a situated action framework to the case studies of two fifth grade teachers, one who taught reading and the other social studies, across a school year. It identified macro, meso, and micro level influences on their assessment practices. To provide broader context to the study, other school actors were also included. The school site was located in the urban fringe of a mid-size city; the school's population was a near even mix of White and racial minority students with half of the students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. The school district had engaged in on-going efforts to maintain and improve mandated test performance.

This study found that there was a proliferation of mandates at the district and building-level. These mandates often overlapped and competed with one another, which

left teachers, who struggled to accommodate mandates, ultimately to use their discretion in determining how to respond to the demands. The district and building devoted many resources, both monetary and human, to support instruction of subjects afforded higher priority because of NCLB mandates, but provided little to support instruction of those that were not subject to such pressures. Further, this study found that social relationships among school actors could influence the movement of policy into classrooms.

Though state assessments prompted a number of local mandates that formalized the assessment of reading and writing, the study found that they did little to rationalize teacher grading, a key aspect of classroom assessment. There was little agreement on the meaning of students' grades across teachers. Both teachers relied heavily on informal observations rather than more formal measures of student learning believing they could discern their students' learning through watching and listening.

This study suggests several questions that should be considered by policy makers. First, is a singular focus on assessment the best way to raise achievement levels of all students? Might we do better by developing tools to help teachers design effective instruction? Second, do we really want teachers to 'teach to the middle' at the expense of students who are either above or below average? Wouldn't it be more effective to acknowledge the vast range of abilities teachers need to deal with in their classrooms and support this work?

This study also suggests that teacher educators might consider along with their students the question of what grades represent. Are they a measure of student learning, or effort, or improvement, or something else? Teacher candidates need to be challenged to consider the complexities of the issue before they arrive in classrooms.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction and Overview

The school reform movement, which has held sway in the United States for the last quarter century, mandates that schools and teachers be held accountable for student outcomes. Proponents for accountability have argued that the education system must establish rigorous content standards, prepare highly qualified teachers to teach that content, and align instructional materials and curriculum with those standards. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) these propositions have become indelibly part of our educational system. NCLB carries consequences for schools that fail to attain Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on standardized tests. In addition to offering parents the choice of sending their children to a different school, schools must also offer Supplemental Educational Services, (SES), or tutoring, for students who fail to meet grade level standards. These sanctions wield strong pressure for school districts to perform well on the tests. For better or worse, the most salient feature of NCLB is mandated testing, which has been the focus of great controversy.

Proponents of accountability have argued that data from standardized tests will help teachers improve student achievement by helping them diagnose student needs, thereby making their instruction more responsive to their students. The U.S. Department of Education claims on its website that, under NCLB, "Teachers utilize assessment data and scientifically based teaching methods to improve classroom instruction" (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) This claim is based on the assumption that teachers have access to good data; it assumes that teachers draw on this data to inform their instruction

in a way that will meet the needs of their students. In addition, the NCLB Act assumes that a once-a-year test is a reliable measure of student achievement and a motivator for both teachers and students to improve.

Critics of NCLB claim that teachers' tacit knowledge about teaching will become unimportant. Teachers' expert knowledge about their students will be irrelevant when faced with the only source of knowledge about students that will matter—the state assessment test that measures progress toward Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). W. James Popham (2006), an expert on testing, warns that the tests are flawed. He cautions that the majority of standardized assessments in use are:

> *instructionally insensitive*—that is, they're unable to detect even striking instructional improvements when such improvements occur. This significant short-coming arises because these tests are so strongly linked to students' socioeconomic status that they tend to measure what students bring to school rather than what they are taught there (Popham).

Popham further argues, since AYP targets are unrealistic, "more teachers are apt to abandon sound instructional strategies like classroom assessment for learning."

In addition, opponents of accountability mandates have argued that one of the unintended consequences of such programs is that teachers "teach to the test." Under threat of sanctions, teachers may now feel that "Whatever is not on the test is not worth knowing, and whatever is on the test need[s] be learned only in the superficial manner that is required to achieve a passing grade" (Labaree, 1997).

Another possible consequence of mandated testing is the narrowing of the curriculum; because schools are under considerable pressure to show progress in reading and math, they sacrifice other subject matter. Even Marshall S. Smith, one of the architects of standards-based reform, has acknowledged this effect and now thinks it is time to "redress this imbalance" (2006). Further, lawmakers who are considering renewal

of NCLB have come under considerable pressure from constituents who feel that their "once-innovative public schools have increasingly become captive to federal testing mandates, jettisoning education programs not covered by those tests, siphoning funds from programs for the talented and gifted, and discouraging creativity" (Weisman & Paley, 2007).

Amid the swirl of controversy over accountability mandates, classroom teachers find themselves dealing with overlapping and sometimes competing demands to meet federal, state and district expectations while addressing the learning needs of their students. With a finite amount of instructional time available, classroom teachers make decisions that shape their instructional, assessment, and grading practices to satisfy a broad range of demands. Teachers must balance the use of class time among federal, state, and district monitoring and accountability testing requirements on the one hand, and their duty to evaluate everyday student performances and ultimately assign a grade on the other. Further, teachers are under a great deal of pressure to improve their students' test scores at least enough to meet AYP. In addition, teachers may be conflicted about the educational value of tests that measure discrete content knowledge versus other, untested-for, and time-consuming educational goals that they deem important, such as social and interpersonal skills and multicultural perspectives throughout the curriculum.

While these tensions most likely exist, no one is entirely certain what happens in the milieu of the classroom when federal, state, district, and teachers' assessment practices meet. In part, this is due to the fact that, though teachers evaluate their students regularly, how they do so has been relatively unexamined by researchers (Wilson, 1992). Large-scale, mandated testing as well as small-scale assessment is a way of life in

classrooms, yet we do not know how teachers negotiate the delicate balance of outside mandates against curriculum requirements and grading practices with limited time, materials and resources. We do not know the relative weight given to these factors nor the logic teachers employ when shaping their assessment practices. In short, we know little about how teachers make sense of the complex, multi-layered context of federal, state, and local mandates and expectations as they construct their assessment practices.

While our knowledge of how teachers make sense of these complexities is limited, with the current focus of educational policy on accountability and the broad implementation of standards-based practice, our need to understand what actually occurs in schools and classrooms is at a critical high. Policy makers need to know whether current educational policies have had their desired effect and to what extent these policies enter into classrooms and shape teachers' assessment practices. In order to address this knowledge gap, I spent an entire school year in an elementary school studying teachers' instructional and assessment practices as they were actually enacted by teachers in order to meet the complex demands put on them.

As I spent time in the school under study, it became apparent that neither side of the accountability dichotomy was completely right. What I saw instead was a complex, dynamic interaction of teachers' own personal preferences, personal histories, and their experiences with students in their own classrooms. Across the building as a whole, teachers' interactions and relationships with colleagues played out in their assessment practices along with pressures for improved student outcomes building-wide. Throughout all of this, I saw the broader emphasis on assessment and the accountability discourse woven among these other factors. The teachers I observed and talked with made

decisions about assessing their students that were bound up with all three of these levels of influence in a dynamic, rather than clear cut or static way. I came to see that the rationale the teachers employed to make assessment decisions was situated in a complex environment. Their decisions were shaped by their interpretations of multiple messages they got from this complex environment.

The quest of this study, then, was to explain how it came to be that some parts of arguments on each side of the accountability question held sway. What factors seemed to be most salient in teachers' decision making about their assessment practices?

In the next chapter, I lay out what we currently know about teachers' assessment practices. Chapter two provides an overview of three strands of educational literature concerned with teachers' assessment practices. Most importantly, in this chapter I identify an important gap in our knowledge about teachers' assessment practices. Extant research fails to explain the way teachers' assessment practices develop and to what extent they are influenced by various factors in the environment. Further, I argue that a situated action perspective allows for a more complete way to look at teachers' assessment practices. A situated action perspective extends existing literature by allowing for an examination of many factors at once, thereby identifying the way in which multiple factors influence teachers' decisions.

In chapter three, I lay out the methods I employed to undertake a study of teachers' assessment practices, along with my rationale for the choices I made. I describe Kensington School and its population. Because of the mix of races and economic levels in the community, Kensington School provided an ideal context in which to explore the way teachers' assessment decisions were influenced by the nested nature of the

classroom, the building and district, and the greater social contexts in which they were located. The district had engaged in ongoing efforts to improve student performance on mandated assessment tests at all levels. This made for a rich site in which to conduct this study. In addition, I explain the modes of data collection, as well as my data analysis decisions.

Chapter Four presents the classroom context of the two focal teachers, Steve Adams and Sue Williams. For each teacher, I describe typical lessons. In addition, I describe an extended unit of study each undertook. The most important function of this chapter is to lay out the embedded assessment practices each teacher employs in their day-to-day instruction. These teachers exhibit very different teaching practices. In part, this can be attributed to the different subject matter each teaches. However, that is not a complete explanation for these differences. In order to understand how these teachers developed different assessment practices, we need to also look at other factors that impact their decisions. These will be taken up in the following chapters.

Chapter five traces the linkages that connect the state assessment to the assessment practices of the two fifth grade teachers who participated in this study. Proponents of mandated assessment assume that such tests will help teachers adjust their instruction to meet the needs of their students. However, this chapter shows that both the district and the building-level administrators mediate the influence of mandated assessments. The district and principal added layers of mandates on top of those imposed by NCLB, creating overlapping and sometimes competing demands on teachers. As a result, teachers in part exerted their own discretion about which demands they accommodated and which they ignored.

Chapter six looks at the assessment practices of these teachers as they related to grading. While grading is an institutional requirement, each teacher had to determine how to make student learning visible and apply some kind of metric in order to translate student learning into a grade. Each of these teachers faced difficulties in accomplishing this. For Sue, making her students' reading progress visible involved selecting the tools, brought to her through mandates, that would best help her accomplish this. In addition, she added her own beliefs about student effort into her grading problem. For Steve, routines allowed him to readily quantify superficial subject matter knowledge and translate this into grades. The problem he faced, however, was how to measure the deeper, substantive learning that he valued over the kind of knowledge that could be measured on summative assessments. Neither of these teachers fully resolved their difficulties with grading.

Chapter seven examines the rich resources of information about student learning offered by the classroom context. Teachers pay attention not only to the academic content of lessons, but also to the social nature of learning. The two teachers in this study drew upon their day-to-day interactions with their students to understand each student's work ethic as well as the behavior they could expect when pairing and grouping students to work together. In addition, when grouping students, the teachers' perception of their students' academic abilities were also considered. This chapter highlights the many tools and resources that were made available to Sue to teach reading and writing. She determined which tools were important to her work and which she would use in her everyday practice. Steve relied on informal observations to discern what his students

learned from his economics unit. In part, this was due to his beliefs about student learning and the types of learning opportunities he provided for his students.

Finally, chapter eight summarizes the conclusions of this study. I identify factors that influenced the assessment choices made by these teachers. I further trace the way mandated assessment shaped the practices of these teachers in light of the main claims made by proponents of mandated assessment: that such assessment will help teachers adjust their instruction to improve student learning, and that it will help teachers understand their students' learning. Then, I raise some questions that are suggested by this study, first as it relates to educational policy, and second as it relates to teacher education.

## Chapter Two

### Toward a Situated Perspective on Teachers' Assessment Practices

This study seeks to answer the following questions about teachers' assessment practices: What are the salient factors that shape teachers' assessment practices? What institutional factors enter into teachers' assessment practices? To what extent do broader educational influences enter into teachers' assessment practices? These questions address the multilayered, complex environment of the classroom. Answers to these questions will necessarily examine the links among these influences.

What follows is an examination of the literature that shows how others have looked at the issue of assessment in classrooms. I will show how each of three prominent strands of literature fail to provide a complete picture of the way teacher assess their students. I will then move from a review of current literature to an explanation of a situated action perspective that provides a viable alternative to existing literature.

Conducting the Literature Review

I began by conducting a search of the ERIC FirstSearch database. The search revealed a small number of articles for each of the following descriptors: ability grouping, tracking, reading groups, grading, teacher expectations, teacher attitudes (with ability grouping), and teacher decision-making. A search using the descriptor of "assessment" resulted in articles on large-scale quantitative assessment; although these studies shed descriptive light on the design of quantitative assessments, they did not add to my understanding of the way teachers use them.

I further narrowed the literature to exclude both secondary teachers and pre-service teachers. I excluded literature about secondary teachers because my study took place in an elementary setting. I excluded pre-service teachers because there is a vast difference between the assessment practices of novices and those of experienced teachers. In addition, pre-service teachers do not have the responsibility of preparation and administration of mandated tests, or designing follow-up instruction. I wanted to focus on current practice in actual classrooms.

In addition to these articles, I included books and articles I had encountered in education courses and in previous research where they were applicable. As I read the articles from the ERIC search, I found references to further articles that were valuable additions to the literature under study.

While the literature review identified a wide range of studies about assessment and grading practices, three main categories seemed to emerge: Prescriptive, Classroom Context, and Cultural. In the next sections, I will define each of these strands of literature and summarize their findings.

## Prescriptive Literature

A large portion of the body of educational literature I reviewed prescribed various ways content knowledge attainment should be assessed. A pedagogical debate that focused on the best *format* of assessments that measure student achievement has separated this strand of literature into two distinct threads: the first promotes the use of standardized tests to inform instruction and measure student progress, while the other promotes the use of alternative forms of assessment, or what is typically called authentic

assessment. What both of these threads share in common is the belief that teachers lack assessment literacy. This literature is written from an outsider's perspective and prescribes what educators *ought* to do to measure academic knowledge, so I have labeled this stream of literature ***prescriptive***. I will take each of the two threads in turn, identifying the arguments each is making about assessment, and what they are attempting to prescribe.

*Large-scale, Standardized Testing*

Proponents of large-scale testing argue that holding teachers and schools accountable for student test scores will ensure more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for all students. Those who have endorsed standardization of the curriculum and a system of national testing argue that both will pass on America's "common culture" to all students, and ensure that all students would be held to and meet the same standards (Hirsch, 1987, 1996; Bennett, 1988; Ravitch, 1995; Ravitch & Finn, 1987). Because the American school system is decentralized, there is great variation in curriculum and resources from district to district; high school diplomas are not comparable credentials across districts. A system of national testing would hold all schools to the same standards effectively making a diploma or degree a common currency readily acceptable by a potential employer to use as a practical guide to hiring (Aronowitz, 1996).

Though a system of nationalized testing has not been realized, recent federal legislation and policies, such as NCLB, have intensified the use of standardized testing by tying rewards and sanctions for educators and students to the results of mandated tests. States and schools are labeled as "failing" if students taking the tests in successive years do not demonstrate adequate yearly progress. Such policies have pushed state legislatures

to align state mandated tests with the federal standards. In addition, many states require a passing grade on high school exit exams in order for students to graduate. Some scholars argue that high stakes tests[1] are a valid means of promoting achievement; by offering rewards for success and sanctions for failure, testing will encourage improved instruction and ensure that students who struggle in school receive adequate educational opportunities (Smith & O'Day, 1991). It is also argued that such a system raises expectations for all students (Aronowitz, 1996) thereby providing equitable access to educational resources for all students.

*Teachers' Use and Misuse of Tests*

The literature reveals that, in many cases, teachers do not utilize the results of standardized tests to either inform their instruction or evaluate their students' progress. Many teachers see standardized tests as a necessary evil that must be tolerated, but for their own classroom purposes they prefer to rely on other ways of assessing their students (Daniel & King, 1998). Teachers use standardized tests as a supplement to other forms of assessment, such as observation and self-written classroom assessments (Salmon-Cox,1981; Stiggins & Bridgeford, 1985). Contrary to the hopes of proponents of standardized tests, it has been found that many teachers rely substantially on "observation" as a means of assessing student progress with standardized tests used primarily as a supplement to this observation (Stiggins & Bridgeford).

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[1] **high stakes tests** - Tests used to determine which individual students get rewards, honors, or sanctions. Low-stakes tests are used primarily to improve student learning. Tests with high stakes attached include college entrance examinations and tests students must pass to be promoted to the next grade. Tests affecting the status of schools, such as those on which a given percentage of students must receive a passing grade, are also considered high stakes. ASCD Lexicon of Learning.

Proponents of standardized tests are critical of teachers' assessment literacy. They argue that not only do teachers not understand standardized tests and their use, but also they do not know how to properly construct their own assessment tools for use in their classrooms. They blame teacher education programs for failing to include assessment instruction in their programs (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). While Guskey (2003) argues that the best kind of assessment is one which provides students feedback on their progress and that informs teachers about instructional improvements they need to make, the literature suggests that this is not the case in practice. Teachers do not use assessment either for self-improvement or student diagnosis; rather, they believe testing results only if it confirms that which they already believe about their students or their instruction (Wilson, 1992). Because results of standardized tests generally do not provide immediate enough feedback to meet teachers' day-to-day classroom needs, teachers often write their own assessments for the purpose of measuring student progress or to determine grades. In addition, teachers rely more consistently on their own assessment materials than standardized test results. Researchers such as Stiggins (1991) find this troubling because, lacking knowledge, teachers cannot "diagnose student needs, group students intelligently, assign meaningful grades, or evaluate the impact of instructional treatments." This assumption resonates with Daniel & King (1998) who warn, based on the use of assessments to make "high stakes decisions (e.g., promotion/retention decisions, program placement decisions, special education screening), teachers' inability to make informed judgments about the merits of these tools could yield very distressing results."

This literature paints a mixed picture for the way teachers use standardized tests; on one hand, it appears that teachers do not use standardized test results to the degree that proponents might wish, but on the other hand, there are some indicators that teachers do pay attention to standardized test results. While Salmon-Cox (1981) found that teachers rely a great deal on observation, she also found that they *do* use standardized tests as a guide for instruction and grouping or tracking students. In addition, it has been widely reported by educational researchers, such as Linda Darling-Hammond (2003), that teachers "teach to the test," thereby narrowing the curriculum that is taught to discrete academic facts rather than deep understanding of content. An analysis of the effects of testing on teacher and student interaction with classroom texts finds that such testing narrows the definitions of reading, thereby working against efforts to raise standards and improve student learning opportunities (Anagnostopoulos, 2005). Proponents of standardized tests believe that teachers *should* teach to the test, arguing that if it is a good test, teaching to the test will improve instruction. It will help both teachers and students by identifying what they need to learn and what they need to focus on as well as to diagnose students' learning needs. Even if teachers who "teach to the test" replace academic curriculum with test preparation lessons, doing so will allow students to perform better on a critical test, thereby enhancing their knowledge with the "right" academic knowledge.

### *Alternative Forms of Assessment*

The form of assessment that has been discussed so far is traditional in nature; standardized and classroom achievement tests that feature predominantly close-ended items (multiple-choice, true/false, checklist, fill-in-the-blank). Alternative forms of

assessment can be contrasted with traditional assessment. Alternative assessment, sometimes called *authentic assessment*, is an umbrella term that encompasses several different assessment strategies (Bintz & Harste, 1994; Worthen, 1993).

> Alternative assessment techniques include performance-based assessments, observation techniques, student self-assessment, and portfolios (a collection of student work that might include the other types of assessment). Alternative assessment is purported to be an authentic indicator of student performance because it closely resembles what a student might be called on to do in class or on a real-world task (Bol, Stephenson, O'Connell & Nunnery, 1998).

Alternative assessments are often promoted as a way to motivate students to take more responsibility for their own learning and to embed the learning experience with authentic activities that recognize more nuanced forms of student abilities than acts of memorization and repetition of basic skills. Authentic assessment requires that teachers use their judgment about their students, include feedback within the teaching process, engage students in "real tasks" and adjust instruction to meet student needs (Wiggins, 1990).

Another proponent for *performance assessment* is David Niemi (1997); he argues that real understanding of subject matter requires a highly organized body of knowledge. Traditional tests measure simple, discrete facts, not highly organized bodies of knowledge. Performance assessments are needed to assess whether students are developing deep understanding and broad knowledge of subject matter.

*Teachers' Use and Misuse of Alternative Assessment*

Criticism of teachers' assessment literacy by proponents of alternative assessments mirrors that found in the standardized testing thread; they argue that not only do teachers not understand how to use alternative forms of assessment, they also do not

understand how to create their own effective assessment tools. Even though teachers widely use performance assessments, Torrance (1993) found that they failed to plan their curriculum based on information derived from performance assessments; teachers treated assessments as an activity separate from teaching and learning. In addition, lacking self-reflection, the teaching-learning process was replaced with grade-driven ritual. Teachers report using observational assessment methods and performance tasks more frequently than traditional assessment. Bol, O'Connell & Nunnery (1998) posit that this may be because teachers are growing dissatisfied with the use of close-ended questions particularly when used in standardized tests for accountability purposes. Because they lack specific training in assessment, teachers either rely on assessments offered by the publisher of their textbook or "construct their own in a haphazard fashion" (Guskey, 2003). In addition, Wilson (1990) found that teachers' self-written tests mirrored the design of provincial tests in order to give students practice. Furthermore, Kahn (2000) has found a disturbing effect of teacher developed assessments: it appears that once teachers have developed tests, it is the tests, rather than instructional goals that drive the curriculum. Teachers appear to design their instruction to cover information that is on the tests; the tests become the raison d'être for what is done in the classroom.

## Classroom Context Literature

Another theme that emerges in educational literature acknowledges that classrooms are complex social environments and that teachers' assessment practices are situated within that environment. This literature takes into account the complex social organization of classrooms and the multiple purposes teachers have for using assessment

in these complex contexts. While teachers are informed in varying degrees by formal assessment, they use the social context of the classroom and their interactions with students to build their understanding of their students' progress. Because this literature explains how complex social environments influence teachers and that all assessment is situated within that environment, I have labeled it ***classroom context*** literature.

While most American classrooms display virtually the same outward appearance, each is populated with a diverse mix of students with a variety of academic, social and emotional characteristics; no two classrooms are alike. One of the most important roles of a teacher is to establish a classroom climate that ensures student compliance with behavioral norms (Lortie, 1975) and makes each student comfortable as a part of the group; failure to do so will invite misbehavior as well as administrative and parental concerns. The complex social nature of the classroom cannot be overstated; each teacher must forge emotional bonds with students in order to encourage effort on their part as well as interest in lessons (Lortie, 1975), while maintaining control over behavior. Teachers engage in a daily balancing act of instructional and administrative roles; the instructional role looks to the academic content of lessons, while the administrative role oversees the organization of routines and procedures that enhance effective use of time. In addition, teachers must deal with the spontaneity of classroom life; they judge when students know or understand something by feelings, looks, sounds, and intuition (Jackson, 1990) and adjust lessons accordingly.

The classroom context strand of literature documents the multiple purposes and ways teachers assess student performance located within this complex classroom context. In addition to academic achievement, teachers assess students' social and emotional

development. One of the major tools at teachers' disposal for assessment of non-academic goals is observation (Lortie, 1975; Salmon-Cox, 1981). Social goals lend themselves more readily to observational (informal) assessment rather than more traditional testing forms used to measure cognitive development. Elementary teachers, especially, seem to highly value social goals for their students (Salmon-Cox, 1981), naming "socializing" an important function of schooling in addition to the need to deal with the "whole child." Such teacher beliefs resonate with researchers who urge the use of teachers' "intuition" and the development of "relationships" as tools for assessment of learning (Brazee & Johnson, 2001). In addition, there is evidence that teachers trust and value their own observations even when they conflict with a students' classroom performance. Support for this high degree of confidence is evidenced in a study that found, despite the high level of subjectivity of observational assessment, teachers' observational judgments about student development to be trustworthy when measured against performance assessments (Meisels, DePrima, Nicholson, Xue, Atkins-Burnett, 2001). The literature does include a downside to an over-reliance on observations, however. Observations are not highly structured, creating potential problems of inconsistency of both the students observed and the curricular and social areas involved (Nicholson & Anderson, 1993).

At least in part, teachers' reliance on their own observational skills may be linked to the insider/outsider perspective. Teachers have the most confidence in their own insider knowledge of their students rather that that of outsiders who do not know their students. They feel confident in their own judgments and give more credence to their observation of classroom performance than to standardized test scores (Salmon-Cox,

1981). Teachers trust their own continuous, on-going, observational assessment of their students, rather than a "snapshot in time" picture that can be given by an outside testing source. Outsiders can measure a student's cognitive development, but have no knowledge of social development that is so highly valued by teachers. Teachers reject the sole use of test performance for decision-making without regard to "other information" as well (Salmon-Cox, 1981); teachers gather such extraneous information from their interactions with and observations of students to whom outsiders do not have access.

*Grading*

The complexity of teachers' assessment practices is evident in the wide variety of indicators used to produce periodic grade reports. In addition to cognitive evidence, teachers use a mélange of indicators including observational data they gather from classroom performance. Teachers imbue the same level of confidence in their own observational data for grade report purposes that they have in assessing the social progress of students. Researchers have documented teachers' tendency to award "a hodgepodge grade of attitude, effort, and achievement" (Brookhart, 1991; Cross & Frary, 1996). A study by Bol et al. (1998) found that teachers relied on observational data and performance assessment tasks more frequently than traditional assessment to determine grades. In general, teachers place the greatest weight on academic performance and academic enabling behaviors (effort, improvement) when grading (Mcmillan, Myran & Workman, 2002), though such behaviors are monitored through informal classroom observations. In the specific case of elementary teachers Gullickson (1985) found the use of non-test information, such as class discussion and student behavior, more influential than test results in determining a grade; disruptive student behavior, grade distributions of

other teachers, and norm-referenced interpretations contribute little to grading for elementary teachers.

## Cultural Literature

The third strand of literature examines the pervasive influence students' and teachers' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds have on education. This literature depicts American education as a constructed social system that exists within the broader social and cultural context of the country. Schools cannot separate themselves from the cultural environment in which they exist. Scholars and researchers who write from this perspective assume that, while no one is accused of having ill intent, schools and teachers reinforce and maintain social stratification and inequality. According to this literature, teachers assess students through the lens of their own culturally skewed glasses and both perpetuate and justify the unequal distribution of school resources and learning opportunities. Because this body of literature uses culture to examine the embedded assumptions about race and class that shape teachers' assessment practices, I have labeled it **cultural** literature.

One of the most prominent scholars in this literature is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction posits that the educational system transmits and rewards the culture of the dominant class. Schools require students to possess the cultural capital, comprised of both linguistic and cultural understanding, of the dominant class in order to succeed academically though schools do not teach such understanding. Through this *concealment*, as Bourdieu refers to it, the educational system reinforces the styles of the elites and leaves most individuals who are not members of the dominant class with

little hope of achieving upward social mobility (Dumais, 2002; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1990; Lareau, 2000; LaMont & Lareau, 1988; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Fritzberg, 2001). "Given that the dominant culture lies at the core of the "hidden" educational curriculum, it is often difficult for children from the lower social strata to grasp the material being taught" (Bourdieu & Passeron, as cited in Driessen, 2001). Kalmijn & Kraaykamp explain that "children who are exposed to cultural capital may be better prepared to master academic material, may develop a taste for learning abstract and intellectual concepts, and may be favored directly by teachers over children who have less cultural capital" (1996).

Many American researchers have found that students who arrive in our public schools at a disadvantage based on their race or class, find an educational system that does nothing to improve their standing; in fact, schools work to reinforce this socially constructed disadvantage. Teachers' assessment practices contribute to these processes. Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) have shown that differences between the cultural capital and educational resources available to black and white students are mirrored in racial disparities in achievement measures. The relationship between students' race and class, teachers' assessment practices and student achievement has been documented in the literature on ability grouping and tracking (Dreeben, 1987; Oakes, 1986; Fritzberg, 2001; Anyon, 1981). Much of this literature finds that poor children arrive at school behind their more affluent peers in schooled competencies and that this disparity is exacerbated by unexamined ability grouping practices. Anyon (1981) correlated social class with educational track placement. Further, she argued that academic content and the quality of teacher-student interactions varied based on the socioeconomic status of the

student. Students in higher tracks were challenged with higher order thinking skills and more instructional interactions with the teacher. Students in the lower tracks were given more knowledge-based curriculum with lower expectations for success.

The landmark work by Ray Rist (1973; 2000) looked at ability grouping practices of teachers and found that school not only mirrored the class system of the larger society but also actively contributed to maintaining it. The teachers Rist observed made judgments about students' academic abilities before any performance-based evidence could be gathered. The teachers' instruction and interactions with students were based on these judgments. These early impressions, which were heavily influenced by racial and cultural bias, shaped teachers' instructional decisions and interactions with students, and, over time, became quite rigid.

While stereotypes and cultural expectations that are available in the broader social context are not entirely within the control of teachers (Dumais, 2002), the way they evaluate and analyze student work is. When analyzing student work, teachers are influenced by students' socioeconomic background and other contextual data; some researchers have identified a direct connection between this background information and grades. Paul DiMaggio (1982) found that the cultural capital of families had a highly significant impact on grades earned in school, approaching the contribution of measured ability. He also identified a gender difference in the cultural advantage passed down from well-educated parents to their children; daughters receive more benefit than sons. Further, in a randomized study, it was found that by varying the cultural background information provided to teachers about a fictional student, teachers' assessment of an identical

portfolio of the fictional student's work resulted in grades that correlated to the perceived amount of cultural capital of the student (Wilson & Martinussen, 1999).

Other research within this strand of literature has examined the role the race of the teacher plays in shaping teachers' assessment practices. When teachers do not share the same cultural background as their students, they may be influenced in their decision-making by cultural understandings shared by the dominant cultural, or *cultural models,* that inform their interactions with their students. Cultural models are "taken for granted models of the world which are widely shared by the members of a society" (Quinn & Holland, as cited by Lipman, 1998). These "cultural models frame teachers' educational decisions and their response to students" (Lipman). Even when teachers share the same cultural background as their students they may, as products of past racial or class discrimination, have internalized beliefs about their students that mimic attitudes held by the dominant community, but that work to the detriment of the students (Anyon, 1995).

These findings resonate with research that has long documented the relationship between student achievement and economic and social structures over which the school and classroom teacher have little control. Since the findings of Coleman (1966), many studies have looked at the relationship of a student's background and academic achievement. Empirical work that has examined test scores from schools across a broad economic range has found that the higher the economic status of the student population, the higher a school's aggregate score on achievement tests. Student achievement is more a function of the school's demographic and socioeconomic status than of the "effectiveness" of instructional practice (Alspaugh, 1991; Caldas (1993); Jencks et al. 1972; Klingele & Warrick, 1990; Sutton & Soderstrom, 1999).

## Limitations of Current Literature

While each of these strands of literature addresses some aspect of assessment, none fully explains the way teachers' assessment practices develop and to what extent they are influenced by various factors in the environment. The prescriptive literature uses a technical lens to explain the rationale and need for various forms of assessment. Of the three strands of literature under examination in this review, this is the broadest and most contentious. The question of high stakes accountability testing is arguably the most politically entangled issue in education today. Proponents argue that standardized accountability testing is necessary to uphold high, uniform standards and to give equitable access to all students. Opponents argue that accountability testing actually lowers teaching standards by focusing instruction on narrowly defined, discrete subject matter knowledge. Despite the rationale of equity for all students, the proponents of high stakes testing do not address the intractability of the achievement gap among races. Nor do they have an alternate explanation for the direct relationship between the socioeconomic status of students and their achievement scores. Another contentious issue highlighted in this literature is the philosophical divide between traditional and alternative assessment. Proponents of alternative assessment are often critics of more traditional assessment, arguing that they assess only discrete measurable knowledge while ignoring the process of learning. On the other hand, proponents of traditional types of assessment counter that close-ended items and assignments are more objective and reliable than alternative types of assessment. In sum, we are not left with an adequate explanation of the way a classroom teacher negotiates his/her way through the territory of assessment.

The classroom context literature uses a social lens to explain how teachers assess their students; it draws on the local knowledge and expertise of the classroom teacher. It acknowledges the variety of subtle forms of information a teacher can attain about students; this assessment is immediate and considers more than discrete subject matter knowledge. It acknowledges the complex milieu of the classroom, but it does not give us a complete explanation of the forces brought to bear on teachers' decisions concerning assessment. Each classroom is populated with a diverse mix of students with a variety of academic, social and emotional characteristics; teachers use a variety of measures to evaluate students' progress and development. This literature does not acknowledge the multi-layered context in which classrooms exist. Teaching and learning occurs in a context of social interactions (classroom) that are nested within broader institutional and social relations (district/community). Policies, such as mandated testing come down from higher levels of the school system itself (federal/state). An explanation of teacher choice and decision-making that stops at the classroom door is thus incomplete. Classrooms are not sealed environments separated from broader influences that define and limit the choices teachers can make.

The cultural literature uses a cultural lens to explain school failure looking at issues of race, class and gender, but it does not give us a complete understanding of the way teachers assess their students. While it rightly points out that some students come into the school system at a disadvantage because of their race, class or gender, it seems to leave us with an "all or nothing" proposition. We either have to accept that teachers are culturally insensitive and are the sole cause of student failure, or we have to reject the hypothesis entirely. They leave little room to accept that some teachers are culturally

sensitive and take steps to counteract the hidden curriculum of the dominant culture, but do not have the wherewithal to entirely counteract larger social constraints to which they themselves are subjected. Further, the cultural explanation of school failure defines the problem as entirely social in nature and does not examine the possibility that it may be a problem of measurement. The intractability of the achievement gap between the races may stem in part from technical inadequacies in the structure of our measurement tools rather than simply an inevitable march toward social reproduction. Finally, the cultural explanation does not take into account the nature of teaching as both work and task. As Lortie noted several decades ago, teaching is highly uncertain. Teachers have long responded to such technical uncertainty by routinizing practices and reducing goals. This is true regardless of the race or class of their students.

## Situated Action as a Framework

In order to address the limitations of the previously described literature, I will delineate situated action as a framework that offers advantages that are not present in current literature. A situated action approach is built on the understanding that a full explanation of individual activity needs to take into account the fact that choices and action occur within a multilayered social context, which affects interpretation and meanings at the local level (Vaughan, 1998, 2000; Suchman, 1987). Rather than isolate an action from the circumstances, a situated action perspective examines the link between an individual's position in a structure and interpretive practices, meaning, and action at the local level (Vaughan). Further, decision-making cannot be disentangled from the social context, which shapes preferences and, thus, what an individual perceives as

rational. The ways people make sense of and act in their social world are informed by *frames of reference* that get developed over time by practical experiences within particular settings; these frames of reference are shaped by institutionalized beliefs available in the larger society and by the norms and taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate action that exist at the organizational level (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). A situated action perspective keeps the focus of research on the situational logic and contingency of a situation while broadening our vision to include macro and meso level factors, enabling us to examine the linkage between environment, organizations, and individual action and meaning (Vaughan, 2002).

Diane Vaughan (2002) has traced the lineage of the situated action perspective through organizational theory, as well as theories of the sociological nature of structure and order. She credits Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell for contributing "transformations" to sociological theory, resulting in a new "theory of practical action." They emphasized the cognitive dimension of action, focusing on "pre-conscious processes and schema as [individuals] enter into routine, taken-for-granted behavior (practical activity)." According to Vaughan, they drew on the works of Giddens on *structuration*, Goffman on *ritual order*, and Collins on interaction *ritual chains*, finding that these theorists maintained the importance of cognition and revealed the routine elements of practical reason. Still missing, however, was the macro-micro link between individual behavior and social structure. DiMaggio and Powell suggest that Bourdieu's (1977) theory of *habitus,* with its attention to taken-for-granted aspects of social action and consciousness, make this connection.

Taking a situated action approach allows the researcher to take into account the complexities of various contexts in order to understand the logic of decisions and actions of individuals. It accounts for institutional logics, comprised of practices and symbolic meanings, guided decision-making and, consequently, action.

> The micro level focus and point of entry will allow us to observe the situational logic and contingency that marks a situation while at the same time broadening our vision to encompass macro and meso level factors, enabling us to examine the linkage between environment, organizations, and individual action and meaning (Vaughan, 2002).

To illustrate, in this study the situated action framework enabled me to investigate the link between the multilayered, social context in which teachers work and teachers' individual decisions and actions taken in the classroom. A full explanation of teachers' assessment practices merged micro level factors that influenced teachers' day-to-day decisions and choices about assessment and grading, as well as the routines and rituals that were part of everyday classroom practice, meso level factors within the school that influenced the interpretation and implementation of policies and how these became the shared norms of the school, and the macro level factors of federal and state accountability policies, professional expectations and norms about teacher's work, as well as cultural ideas about achievement and how we measure it. These nested, multilayered forces simultaneously narrowed options and shaped choices teachers considered rational at the time they made them within the context of their work.

Table 1 illustrates a comparison of the explanation of teachers' assessment practices that is currently available in the educational literature with the explanation offered by the situated action perspective. The situated action perspective allows for a

more complete explanation of teachers' assessment practices than is present in the educational literature that has already been reviewed.

**Explanation of Teachers' Assessment Practices:**

**Comparing Educational Literature and Situated Action**

| | Prescriptive | Classroom Context | Cultural | Situated Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Micro | *Teachers' lack of assessment literacy<br>*How teachers *should* use assessment | *Teachers' assessment decisions based upon classroom contingencies | *Teachers' unexamined assessment practices based on students' race, class, gender (habitus) | *Teachers' everyday practices based on their assessment literacy<br>*Teachers' beliefs about students, instruction & learning<br>*Routines and rituals<br>*Daily contingencies |
| Meso | | | | *Teachers' decisions and practices shaped by collegial interactions<br>*Shared norms about assessment<br>*school/district policies and expectations |
| Macro | | | *Cultural models of race, class, and gender<br>*Cultural models of school success/failure | *Teachers' assessment practices shaped by professional norms and beliefs<br>*Cultural models of race, class and gender<br>*Notions of school success/failure<br>*Beliefs about testing<br>*Federal/state accountability policies |

**Table 1**

The prescriptive literature points to teachers' lack of assessment literacy. Educational policies assume that teachers will use the information gained from standardized testing to both inform their instruction and to assess their students' learning needs, while the prescriptive literature criticizes teachers for not doing so. Prescriptive literature, however, fails to look at the complex classroom environment in which teachers work, it does not account for issues of race, class, or gender, nor does it consider the mediating force the organization of schools can have on the choices teachers make about

assessment. The classroom context literature acknowledges the complex classroom setting in which assessment practices take place, but it does not examine the multi-layered context in which classrooms exist. It does not consider the broader institutional and social context (district/community), nor does it explain how policies, such as mandated testing, that come down from higher levels of the school system itself (federal/state) impact teachers' assessment practices. The cultural literature considers the role of *habitus* (micro) and cultural models (macro) and the way they impact a student's achievement, but it does not acknowledge the multilayered social context of schools. Teachers and students draw on their own understandings of cultural factors while negotiating those meanings within the context of their school.

I argue that in order to understand teachers' assessment practices, we must understand that people act and interpret messages in a nested, multilayered context; it is within this context that teachers do their work. Applying the situated action perspective gives me a systematic way to look at many things at once. At the micro level, it allows me to examine how teachers' everyday assessment practices are shaped by their knowledge of assessment, their beliefs about instruction, their beliefs about students and learning, as well as the routines and rituals they have developed over time in their classroom. While allowing me to look at individual level processes, actions, and interpretations and how they become routinized, at the same time they can be open to the contingencies of local, everyday interactions. At the meso level, the situated action perspective allows me to examine how teachers' decisions and practices are shaped by their interactions with other teachers, their shared norms about assessment and good instruction, as well as their shared beliefs about students and what students are capable

of. At the school level, I am able to examine formal mandates from the district, and how the district interprets and enacts policy mandates by both state and federal governments. At the macro level, the situated action perspective allows me to examine how teachers' assessment practices are shaped by broader understandings about schooling and what teachers' work is, and cultural models of types of students. All of these, taken together, shape teachers' understanding of the choices that are available to them and what makes the most sense in any given situation. The situated action perspective allows me to analyze the complex school environment in an organized manner.

# Chapter Three

## Methods

### Research Design

In order to understand the socio-cultural processes at work and how they shaped the assessment practices of elementary teachers, I used a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 1994). This approach seemed to be most compatible with a situated action perspective. According to Vaughan, "to fully capture the structure/culture/agency link...case studies in naturalistic settings offer the greatest potential" (1998). This approach provided the following benefits: (a) it allowed me to study events as they naturally happened and without manipulating them; (b) it allowed me to study teachers' assessment practices in a real classroom context; and (c) it allowed me to collect multiple sources of data around my questions (Yin, 1984). In addition, it allowed me to start with analysis at the local level to understand teachers' logic within their classroom context, and then work out to the meso and macro levels.

*Selecting the Site*

My original goal was to have two elementary schools in each of two different counties as sites for my study. I contacted principals who had an ongoing relationship with the university; each was a placement site for the university's interns. In June 2005, three principals agreed to allow me to conduct my research study in their buildings. Since I would not be able to talk to the teachers until August and knowing that some teachers might not wish to participate in the study, I felt that the extra site would be good

insurance that I would still be able to attain two sites. In the case that all three schools agreed to participate, I would have conducted my study at three sites.

In order to get the consent of the teachers to participate, I had the principals set a time for me to meet with the teachers as a group. I presented an overview of my study to the teachers. I then asked the principal to contact me when the teachers had decided whether or not they wished to participate in the study. After presenting my research model to the teachers in all three schools, the teachers at two of the schools chose not to participate. I then proceeded to contact additional principals. I obtained agreement from another school principal, but again, the teachers did not wish to participate. That left me with one school site for my study. I proceeded with that site.

While conducting my study at one site was not what I had planned, the single site offered an advantage. Focusing on a single case allowed a depth of observation that would not have been possible had I been working across different sites. By increasing my time in one building, I not only got to know the teachers and the social/professional relationships better, I was also able to capture the subtle and iterative processes by which these teachers constructed and reconstructed their assessment and grading practices. Although not generalizable, the in-depth observation made possible by the single case provided the opportunity to theorize and generate new hypotheses about the relationships of micro-, meso, and macro level processes that would otherwise have remained invisible to me.

## Kensington School [2]

Kensington School is located in a city with a population of over 45,000. According to the city's website[3] the racial makeup of the city is approximately 80%

[2] All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, including school and teachers.

White, less than 10% Black, 6% Native American, 4% Hispanic/Latino, and under 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. The median income for a household in the city is approximately $46,000, with approximately 5% of families living below the poverty line. Out of the total population, approximately 8% of those under the age of 18 and 6% of those 65 and older are living below the poverty line.

The National Center for Education Statistics has labeled the school district as "urban fringe of a mid-size city."[4] The district in which Kensington School was located had ten elementary schools, three middle schools and one high school with a total school population of nearly 7000 students. The district was bounded on the north by an urban district, on the west by another district similar to itself, on the east by a mostly white, middle-to-upper class suburb, and on the south by a mostly rural township that was quickly becoming filled with new housing developments of large, expensive homes.

Given its location and demographics, Kensington School provided an ideal context in which to explore the way teachers' assessment decisions were influenced by the nested nature of the classroom, the building and district, and the greater social contexts in which they were located. The community was comprised of a mix of races and economic levels; this provided a rich mix of diverse viewpoints that were represented in the school population. The district had engaged in ongoing efforts to improve student performance on mandated assessment tests at all levels. These efforts were manifest in Kensington School and in the classrooms in which I conducted my research.

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[3] In order to maintain confidentiality, the website is not being cited.

[4] Urban Fringe of a Mid-size City: Any incorporated place, Census designated place, or non-place territory within a CBSA of a Mid-size City and defined as urban by the Census Bureau. Prior to 1994–95, defined as any incorporated place, Census designated place, or non-place territory within a CBSA or CSA and defined as urban by the Census Bureau, with a principal city with a population less than 400,000 or a population density less than 6,000 people per square mile. NCES

## Demographics of Student Population

Table 2 reports changes in the student population at Kensington School from the 1998-1999 school year to 2004-2005 school year, the last year for which statistics are available.[5] The * replaces the last digit in the total enrollment for the school. The other categories are stated as a percentage of the total population for each school year.

**Demographics of Kensington School Population[6]**

| School Year | 98/99 | 99/00 | 00/01 | 01/02 | 02/03 | 03/04 | 04/05 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Enrollment | 41* | 41* | 42* | 43* | 39* | 39* | 37* |
| Total Free/Reduced | n/a | 25% | 30% | 36% | 46% | 48% | 50% |
| Asian | 7% | 6% | 9% | 4% | 4% | 6% | 6% |
| Hispanic | 6% | 4% | 4% | 4% | 3% | 4% | 5% |
| Black | 17% | 20% | 26% | 35% | 40% | 43% | 42% |
| White | 70% | 70% | 61% | 57% | 53% | 47% | 47% |

**Table 2**

Table 2 shows that the number of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch increased over five year's time from 25% of the school's population to 50% of the school's population. In addition, the racial distribution of the school population changed from a 70% majority of White students to a more evenly balanced mix of White and Black students. Further, this demonstrates that, even though the Black population in the community was less than ten percent, they were highly represented in the population of Kensington School.

[5] National Center for Education Statistics: Common Core of Data Public School Data
[6] Numerical data has been approximated to further obscure the identity of the school, yet not mislead interpretations.

*Grade Level/Subject Matter*

In order to provide depth to this study, I concentrated my focus was on the fifth grade teachers and limited the content areas to social studies and reading. While social studies is my main subject matter interest, there were good reasons to include reading in the study. Reading is often integrated with social studies instruction because most often students must read some sort of text during social studies instruction. Many teachers take advantage of this integration by using the reading of social studies text for reading instruction. In addition, in this study, reading is an umbrella term that includes language arts and writing instruction. In the elementary grades, it is difficult, if not impossible to parse out the instruction of reading, language arts and writing. The instruction of these subjects is integrated and, therefore, all have been included in observations.

The fifth grade was chosen as the focus of this study because of the schedule of the state's assessment tests. The fifth grade is the site of several state assessment tests: Reading, Writing, English/Language Arts, Math, and Science. The 2005-2006 school year was the first time the social studies state assessment test was given in the sixth grade. The social studies test had previously been taken in the fifth grade, so the fifth grade teachers were familiar with the test and its content coverage. In addition, since the state moved the social studies test to the fall of the sixth grade, the fifth grade teacher was expected to provide the lions' share of test preparation to the fifth grade students who would take the test the following fall as sixth graders.

Another complicating factor impacted this study. When I originally discussed my project with the building principal, each fifth grade was a self-contained classroom in which each teacher taught all subject matter. At the time I started my study in the fall of

2005, the fifth grade had departmentalized instruction in science, social studies, math, and reading/language arts. Instead of having two fifth grade teachers who taught all subjects to their own class, I had one fifth grade teacher who taught science and social studies to both classes and the other fifth grade teacher who taught math and reading/language arts to both classes.

In order to add breadth to this study, I included teachers in the fourth and third grades who agreed to participate in the study. (One third grade teacher chose not to participate in the study.) My rationale was to include the other teachers in the building whose students took the state assessment tests. The year in which this study took place was the first time third grade students were included in the state assessment schedule. This allowed me to make cross grade comparisons in relation to teachers' decision making and their assessment practices. In addition, it gave me a better understanding of the social relationships at work in the building. Further, the principal and the academic support coach were included in the interview schedule to include more cross-grade, school context data.

**Study Participants at Kensington School**

| Name | Grade | Years Teaching | Years at Kensington |
|---|---|---|---|
| Steve Adams | 5th | 16 | 6 |
| Sue Williams | 5th | 2 | 1 |
| Nancy Lyons | 4th | 19 | 8 |
| Greg Murray | 4th | 5 | 1 |
| Kim Anderson | 3rd | 27 | 16 |
| Mary Locke | Academic Support Coach | 24 | 16 |
| Wilma Mathews | Principal | 6 (as teacher) | 2 (as principal) |

**Table 3**

Table 3 shows the participants in my study, along with their grade level or role in the school, the total number of years they had been teaching, and the number of years they have been at Kensington School.

*Data Collection*

I used several modes of data collection for this study: (a) scheduled interviews, (b) classroom observations, (c) informal observations and conversations with participants, (d) observations of various staff meetings throughout the school year, and (e) artifacts of practice.

*Interviews*-I conducted scheduled interviews with the two focus teachers six times across the 2005-2006 school year (see Appendix A and B). I conducted two scheduled interviews with the third and fourth grade teachers (see Appendix C), the principal (see Appendix D), and the academic support coach (See Appendix E). In addition, I conducted follow-up interviews with the focus teachers (see Appendix F), the principal (see Appendix G), and the academic support coach (see Appendix H) in the fall of the 2006-2007 school year. In addition to the questions in the interview protocols, I asked follow up questions when appropriate to elicit more information or to clarify answers that were given. These interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

*Classroom Observations*-I conducted classroom observations of all the teachers who participated in this study, but I concentrated on the classrooms of the two fifth grade teachers. I made three classroom observations of the participating third grade teacher and both fourth grade teachers. In addition, I was able to observe two lessons taught by the academic support coach. I used a generic observation form (see Appendix I) on which I noted the academic content being taught, the instructional strategies being used, the

student assignment, and the assessment for the assignment. While I asked teachers to allow me to observe instruction in social studies and reading classes, they were entirely in control of the lessons I observed. All observations were scheduled at the teacher's convenience; there were no surprise classroom observations.

*Informal observations and conversations*-I was able to make informal observations of the teachers at various meetings throughout the year. I attended school improvement team meetings (3), staff meetings (5) and meetings concerning the administration of the state assessment tests (2). I also attended an all-day inservice of teacher training for the Lindamood-Bell program. During these meetings I sat in close enough proximity to be able to hear conversations and take notes, but I did not sit among the teachers. I took notes during the meetings including the topics being discussed, any side conversations I could hear, and noted seating arrangements and whether seating/grouping was directed or self-selected. In addition to these formal observations and conversations, I had access to ad hoc conversations that took place between teachers before and after school, and in the hallways. I made note of comments from these conversations as soon after they took place as was possible. At times, I was able to repeat what I heard directly into my tape recorder, such as when I got into my car.

*Artifacts of practice* – I asked the teachers to share with me any assessment instruments they used throughout the year. I collected most of these at the time of an observation of a lesson during which the artifact was being used. In one case, at the end of the year Steve Adams gave me the book containing the social studies textbook publisher's assessments and marked the pages he had used. I made the copies myself. In addition to assessment instruments, teachers also shared student assignment sheets,

rubrics used to evaluate student work, handouts from faculty meetings, and copies of district assessments. The principal gave me a booklet that was given to parents about mandated assessments, copies of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade report cards, the school's annual report, and handouts from the professional development meetings.

**Distribution of Observations and Interviews**

| Name | Grade | Interviews | Observations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Steve Adams | 5 | 7 | 11 |
| Sue Williams | 5 | 7 | 14 |
| Nancy Lyons | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| Greg Murray | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| Kim Anderson | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Mary Locke | Academic Support Coach | 3 | 2 |
| Wilma Mathews | Principal | 3 | n/a |

**Table 4**

Table 4 shows the distribution of interviews and observations that took place with the participating faculty at Kensington School. Most of the interviews and observations were with the two fifth grade teachers, Steve Adams and Sue Williams.

These modes of data collection combined breadth (interviews with faculty across grade levels, members of SIT, the principal, the academic support coach) with depth (scheduled interviews and observations of a subset of focus teachers). I was able to observe several teachers across half-days of observation, rather than dropping in for a bounded time period of a single lesson, giving me access to teachers' ad hoc and informal conversations with their colleagues. Observing in focus teachers' classrooms for several days in a row provided a sense of flow and continuity of instruction in the near term, and doing observations at different times in the school year provided insight into change over time.

*Data Analysis*

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the study year (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initial codes identified emerging themes and highlighted areas for additional data collection. After all data was collected I obtained N-vivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to further code and sort the interview transcriptions. I did not use the software to code classroom observations, observations of meetings or ad hoc conversations. I typed those up and coded them manually using the same codes I had identified in the interview data. I crosschecked all forms of data to detect disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

My codes for the teachers were as follows:

Teacher Knowledge and source of that knowledge
- Subject Matter knowledge
- Assessment knowledge

What/who determines subject matter content of instruction?
- Teacher decision (micro)
- School/district (meso)
- Mandated tests (macro)

Where/how do teachers learn about their students?
- Classroom interactions (micro)
- Other teachers, school sources (meso)
- Mandated tests (macro)

Grading
- Teacher (micro)
- School/district policy (meso)

My codes for the principal were as follows:

Mandated testing
- District (meso)
- NCLB/state assessment (macro)

Principal as a player in the process - link between meso/macro
- Does principal emphasize macro testing expectations?

Does principal institute school-wide policy to meet/exceed mandates?

In addition, in the N-vivo program I initially coded six "Free" nodes: Prescriptive, Classroom Context, Cultural, Micro, Meso, and Macro. I added Social Studies Text and Reading Text codes when it appeared that they could be factors to be considered in the findings. In addition, I coded six major "Tree" nodes: Teacher Knowledge, Instructional Content, Source of Knowledge About Students, Grading, School Culture, Classroom Assessment Practices.

After the initial coding was completed, I summarized the micro, meso, and macro influences for each of the focus teachers. I then did the same for the other participants. As I did so, major themes and key interactions became evident.

Several features of my research design were intended to ensure that the patterns and conclusions from this study would be representative of this specific research site. These include intensive immersion at the research site across an entire school year (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992), systematic sampling of evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994), efforts to explore disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994), systematic coding of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

# Chapter Four

## Classroom Context: Portraits of Teachers' Embedded Assessment Practices

*Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to understand how teachers' assessment practices are situated in a multilayered context and what factors influence their decisions. Their practices are shaped by the teacher's own experiences, organizational norms, and broader understandings of teaching and learning. Using the situated action perspective as an analytic tool allows me to expose and examine the interactive nature of conditions, influences, and factors of the micro, meso, and macro levels. These conditions and norms, however, are not static; they are dynamic and can change over time or in specific circumstances. While teachers spend most of their time teaching in their own classrooms behind closed doors where they have autonomy to control their own instructional choices, they are not immune from the normative pressure exerted by colleagues who share common goals in a common workspace. At the same time, individual teachers can exert influence on individual colleagues as well as the collective practices and norms of the building. These individual and collectively agreed upon instructional and assessment practices are further nested within broader cultural understandings and scripts available in the environment regarding teaching, students, and schooling.

In order to understand the situated nature of teachers' assessment practices and the dynamic interaction of the micro, meso, and macro influences on them, in this chapter I will provide detailed portraits of each teacher's assessment practices. This chapter

focuses on the classroom context of the two fifth grade teachers at Kensington School. This allows for a side-by-side comparison of two different subject matters as it relates to the teachers' embedded assessment practices as well as their personal preferences, habits, understandings and trainings that have gotten built up and into their everyday practice over time. First, I present an overall picture of the teacher's background and teaching history, instructional resources used in their classroom, as well as a description of typical instruction procedures and embedded assessment practices. In order to add breadth to each portrait, I then give a description of an extended unit of study undertaken by each teacher in their assigned subject area.

Steve Adams and Sue Williams are the fifth grade teachers at Kensington School. The fifth grade curriculum was departmentalized for the instruction of the four core subject areas.[7] Each teacher had a homeroom of students for whom they were responsible, except for the subject matter taught by the other teacher. Steve taught science and social studies to both classes and Sue taught math and reading/language arts. In the morning, the teachers taught to their own homeroom of students. In the afternoon, the students switched classrooms and were taught the other subjects by the other teacher. I will first present a portrait of Steve Adams who taught social studies to both fifth grade classes at Kensington School. This will be followed by a description of the instructional and assessment practices of Sue Williams who taught reading and language arts to both fifth grade classes.

## Steve Adams: 5th Grade Social Studies

[7] The four core subjects are math, science, social studies, and reading. As was described in the methods chapter, this study focuses on the subjects of social studies and reading/language arts. The other subjects are included only when they help explain the context.

Steve Adams came to teaching as a second career. Through his volunteer involvement in his own children's school, he found he was very interested in teaching as a career. After successfully completing one education class, he decided to return to school full-time in order to obtain teaching credentials. He majored in social studies at a local college with a religious affiliation. He was a substitute teacher for two and a half years in the adjacent urban district before getting his first full-time teaching job. At the time of this study, he had sixteen total years of teaching experience, six of which were in Kensington School.

Steve's teaching experience prior to arriving at Kensington had been in third through sixth grades in a variety of classroom settings. He taught self-contained classes, departmentalized classes where he has shared responsibility with other teachers for curriculum coverage, and he taught in a third through fifth grade multi-age setting. In the multi-age setting, there were three classrooms that participated in switching rooms for math, language arts, science, and social studies. Students were grouped either by grade level or by ability, depending on the subject. Steve remained in that classroom for three school years, but with a change in administration, that program was eventually discontinued. Steve has taught fifth grade for the six years he has been at Kensington.

The 2005-2006 school year, the year of this study, was the first time the fifth grade curriculum had been departmentalized at Kensington School. Steve chose to teach science and social studies to both 5$^{th}$ grade classes, while the newly hired teacher, Sue Williams, was assigned math and reading/language arts. Each teacher taught their homeroom students in the morning, and in the afternoon, classes switched for a block of time to allow instruction to the other class. Soon after the school year started, Steve and

Sue mutually agreed that there was not sufficient time available in the afternoon for the instruction of both math and reading/language arts. Because there was more time available in the morning when Steve taught his own homeroom, he took on the guided reading portion of the reading/language arts curriculum for his own homeroom, and Sue continued to teach his class the self-selected reading, writing, and working with words portions of the reading/language arts curriculum.

Steve used a variety of instructional resources to teach social studies at Kensington School. He used the district selected social studies textbook[8] as the centerpiece of the 5th grade social studies curriculum. For the most part, the textbook provided the scope and sequence of his instruction. He did supplement the textbook with an economics unit he had obtained from other teachers in the building. In addition, he used Time for Kids[9], a weekly news magazine which came with accompanying support materials, such as copy-ready comprehension questions and other activities to support the teaching of the topics covered in each issue. He also used worksheets from a book called Daily Geography.[10] One page was usually assigned per week, rather than daily. He skipped around the geography book depending on what related to the topic being studied in the textbook at the time. Steve had also assembled a "packet" consisting of four worksheets for each of the continents[11]. The first page included a map of the continent with political and geographical information. The following pages consisted of questions, some of which could be answered with information found on the map, and others that require additional research. In order to facilitate answering the various geography

[8] The United States and its Neighbors (1993) Macmillan/McGraw-Hill School Publishing Company.
[9] Time for Kids, World Report Edition (2006) Time, Inc.
[10] Daily Geography (1991) McDougal, Littell & Co.
[11] Frank Schaffer Publications, Inc.

questions, for these packets and the Daily Geography worksheets, a variety of reference materials were available in the classroom such as maps, atlases, and the internet. The classroom had four desktop computers with encyclopedia programs, as well as two additional sets of encyclopedias, which could be used for social studies research. The school's library was another resource for students to use for social studies assignments, especially because of its extensive selection of biographies available for reports.

**Social Studies Instruction in Steve Adams' Classroom**

> My personal goal is that I cover the things we are required to cover in a way that the kids find interesting so they will be able to pick up the information, and that they are successful working on activities that we do, and they walk away from it remembering important points. (KC.5SA.05.09.28)

The most notable feature of Steve's classroom was that every available inch of wall space is covered with signs, posters, and displays of science and social studies related topics. The social studies displays ranged from posters of world explorers, picture charts of colonial times, a chart of flags of the world, maps of each continent, a flow chart depicting the three branches of the federal government, and posters about Native American tribes. The bulletin boards were covered with layers of overlapping pictures, notices, schedules and other information. Every flat surface in the room was covered with piles of books, papers, supplies, and student projects. There was a permanent teaching station at the front of the room near a useable section of whiteboard that included a table for the teacher's materials, an overhead projector on a cart, and a pull-down screen. This area too, was overfilled with an accumulation of the effluent of six years of teaching in the same classroom.

Student desks were arranged in groups to facilitate cooperative activities. Many times, students were asked to work with their seating partners. Most of the time they were allowed to self-select partners with whom they wished to work cooperatively; however, Steve did occasionally assign working partners based on academic or social considerations. Sometimes, he chose to partner a student who was "struggling" with another who was "doing well" in order to give peer support. At other times, he assigned partners who would not "be too social" in order to maintain order in the classroom and to facilitate students getting their work done. In addition, he did not hesitate to reassign self-selected partners if they did not maintain behavior expectations.

Steve taught social studies twice a day; in the morning he taught his homeroom class, and in the afternoon the classes switched and he repeated the day's lesson for Sue Williams' class. The day's agenda and schedule was always written on the board for all students to see so they could have materials ready for class.

*Embedded Assessment Practices*

During a typical social studies lesson in Steve's class, student work was corrected as a whole class activity. In one such lesson, class began with students correcting a Time for Kids worksheet that was completed after reading the previous week's issue. Steve kept a jar containing craft sticks, each with a student's name. He randomly pulled a stick and called on the student whose name was on the stick. He occasionally asked a follow up question to the student's response, such as "Did the article name the students?" (No) "How many years was it?" (9 years). When one student shared an answer that other students disagreed with, he had them go back to the article to support their answers. At one point when another student confirmed that the disputed answer had been correct,

Steve said, "You have a good researcher sitting next to you." In one case, students had interpreted a question differently and come up with different answers. Steve agreed with the students that the question was not clear and referred to the teacher's answer sheet to confirm the intended answer. He told students who had an alternate answer to the question that if they could provide evidence from the article to support their answer, he would accept it. When they were nearly finished correcting the worksheet, Steve pointed out to them that they could have gotten clues from the subheadings in the article to help them find the answers. He made a connection to material they had read previously when the article mentioned Asian features on a skull found in Washington State. He reminded them that they had previously read about the theory of a land bridge that might have been used by ancient people to come to the North American continent. When all questions had been covered, he announced that the assignment would get 10 points. There would be 1 point for each of the seven questions and one each for including the student's name, student number[12], and the date. This same procedure was used when correcting students' answers to end-of-chapter questions in the textbook.

Lessons usually included reading a selection either from the textbook or from an issue of Time For Kids. In one such lesson, students were assigned a couple pages in the textbook. Prior to reading Steve set the purpose for the reading selection by posing the question, "Why was trade important to New England?" Students pair-read the selection. When they finished reading, they were asked to cooperatively write a paragraph, with a minimum number of sentences, to answer the question. Steve asked for "someone with

[12] Each student was assigned a student number that corresponded to the alphabetical order his or her name appeared in the class list. In this way, Steve could quickly put assignments in number order before he marked his grade book. This method saved time for him.

good handwriting" to write the pair's answer. When asked how he would assess the assignment, he said he would see if they were finding the answer.

Steve included geography in his social studies curriculum with materials that were not included in the textbook. Daily Geography worksheets were given once a week and the packets of worksheets on the continents were distributed occasionally when they did not have other projects in the works. One such lesson that was observed included both the Daily Geography worksheet and the packet for Australia. Before students were "let loose" to do their work, Steve went over the various places students could look to find the answers. He randomly drew student names to assign eight students to the four computers available in the classroom. Students then worked either alone or in groups to complete the assignments. Students were given one week to complete the Daily Geography worksheet and two weeks to complete the Australia packet. The Daily Geography worksheet would be corrected in a whole class activity, each question being given one point. Steve would correct the Australia packet using the rubric he had designed for the assignment (Appendix J), which was worth 100 points. Each assignment would be part of the marking period grade. He often provided his students with both an assignment sheet that explained his expectations as well as a rubric that showed students the points they received for each part of the assignment. Examples of these are found in Appendix K and Appendix L.

Steve designed "hands-on" assignments that he included as part of his social studies instruction. For example, he had students design and create a talisman or amulet in connection with their study of Native Americans of North America. They also built a model teepee. Each of these assignments was accompanied by a rubric Steve created that

denoted the point value of each portion of the assignment. For example, the talisman assignment (Figure 1, on p. 139) included a written portion: definition of talisman (4pts.), description of materials used (3 pts.), reason they were used (3 pts.), the meaning the student ascribed to his or her own talisman (15 pts.); as well as an artistic portion: the actual talisman made by the student (30 pts.), and a color drawing of the talisman (15 pts.). In addition, students are given an additional 30 points for assembling the written pieces and the color drawing into a final copy that was turned in.

Steve gave occasional summative tests that became part of the marking period grade. The chapter and unit tests were provided along with the textbook series. He sometimes adjusted these tests, deleting material he might have skipped in the textbook or adding questions on material he had emphasized.

*Economics unit*

Steve's economics unit spanned the entire school year, with parts of it initiated early in the school year and the culminating activity at the end of the year. At the beginning of the school year, Steve's students "applied" for various classroom jobs (such as cleaning the gerbil cage, passing out materials, keeping track of playground equipment, being materials vendors or bankers for the class bank, etc.) for which they were paid weekly in classroom money. If a student was absent he or she had to pay the substitute who completed the job while they were away. On the weekly payday, students were paid $5.00 in classroom money if they had turned in all five of the assignments Steve had designated for that week. The bankers managed student accounts and kept track of accumulated savings. Students participated in a classroom contest to design the "money" to be used for the year. They participated in a poll concerning the products and

services they wished to have included in their day of sale; other students referred to the list when deciding what business they would create.

Near the end of the school year, the projects began in earnest. Each student, or pair of students, if they chose to work together, decided on a service or product they would sell. They named their business, applied for a business license, rented a location for the business, rented special equipment for the day of the sale (such as a power cord), and prepared advertising posters. Students had to "buy" or "rent" materials used to make their posters. Steve taught lessons on sales and marketing, including a lesson on various forms of businesses (sole proprietor, partnership), as well as advertising techniques (bandwagon, testimonial, celebrity endorsement, comparison, etc.) to be used on their posters.

The culmination of the unit consisted of one hour of sales that took place on two days, a week apart. After the first day, students were encouraged to evaluate what went well and what could be improved, what product or service sold well or didn't sell well, to determine what further supplies would be needed for another day of sales. Teachers and students in all other classes in the building were given a complimentary amount of class "money" to spend at these businesses. Each class came to the sale for an assigned time slot in order to give every student in the building an opportunity to participate.

The things Steve took into account as he assessed his students' participation in the economics activity were: their profit and loss sheet, their participation in the product idea poll, whether their business poster contained the requisite components, whether the business license contain the name of the business and was it properly endorsed, whether the business was set up in the manner described on their business plan, as well as

worksheets on business terminology and concepts. Points were assigned for each of these and were included in their grade for the marking period.

### Sue Williams: 5th Grade Reading/Language Arts

Sue Williams was a second year teacher at the time of this study. She graduated from a large, state university in 2003 with a major in science. In the first year after graduation, she taught as a substitute in various elementary buildings in the area, including the urban district that is adjacent to the site of this study. In January of that year, she obtained a long-term substitute job teaching French in a middle school. The following school year began with more subbing in elementary schools. In November she obtained a long-term subbing job teaching fifth grade in an elementary school in the urban district. She was the fourth teacher in that classroom at the time she was hired. She was hired at Kensington School in June of 2005. This gave her the summer to prepare for her first full-time job.

At the time she was hired at Kensington School, she knew that she would be responsible for teaching reading/language arts and math to both fifth grade classes. Over that summer, Sue received one-on-one instruction in the Four Blocks framework for literacy instruction from the academic support coach at Kensington. Sue was somewhat familiar with the model because it had been used in her previous school, but she had not been given any Four Blocks training at that time. In her first year teaching at Kensington, she received further professional development training in Everyday Math (three

sessions), Six Traits + 1[13] writing, and Big Four Blocks literacy model, which I describe below.

Sue Williams used a wide variety of instructional resources for reading and language arts. The main source of reading material was the district's adopted textbook series.[14] In addition to using the stories for guided reading, she also used the end-of-story comprehension questions and writing prompts. She had several classroom sets of novels, including Number the Stars[15], which she used for guided reading content. She assessed students after reading the novel using materials from a Literacy Unit book that accompanied the set of novels. She also used a notebook of miscellaneous materials for reading and language arts instruction that she had compiled of materials shared by the reading consultant from her previous teaching position. She started the year adhering closely to a district-supplied 20-day plan of reading and language arts lessons specifically designed to help students get ready to take the state assessment in October. She continued using these materials throughout the school year. She also used Daily Oral Language[16] materials for grammar and punctuation instruction.

**Four Blocks Literacy Model**

Kensington School used the Four Blocks Literacy Model as a framework for reading and language arts instruction. Big Blocks is a modified version of Four Blocks for 3rd grade and higher. Sue Williams used the Big Blocks format for her fifth graders.

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[13] Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. (2004). This writing assessment model attributes six key qualities define strong writing; the "+1" is presentation or the look of the writing on the page.
[14] Literacy at Work (1996) Scholastic, Inc.
[15] Number the Stars. (1989) Lois Lowry. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, MA.
[16] Daily Oral Language, Young People's Press.

The Four Blocks[17] framework was developed more than a decade ago for first through third grades (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee 1991, 1998). Four Blocks is what many would call a balanced literacy[18] approach. Based on the premise that children learn to read in different ways, this model provides 150 minutes per day of four different approaches, or blocks, for reading instruction. What follows is a description of the Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words blocks of instruction[19].

*Guided Reading Block* – the purpose of this block is to build comprehension and fluency, and to introduce students to a variety of texts including stories, informational text, and poetry. The teacher uses a variety of pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies to instruct students of all reading levels in whole class or small group reading sessions. The teacher may read a portion of the selection aloud, an individual student may read a portion, or students may take turns reading to each other (pair share). During a guided reading instruction block, students receive a great deal of support from the teacher and classmates with the goal of becoming independent readers.

*Self-Selected Reading Block* – the purpose of this block is to build fluency in reading, to allow students to read and enjoy text that is appropriate to their own independent reading levels, and to build confidence in students as readers. The block may begin with the teacher reading selection aloud. Students choose what they want to

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[17] Four Blocks materials published by Carson-Dellosa Publishing Company, Inc.

[18] Over the years, there have been two general instructional approaches to reading instruction. They are generally known as Phonics and Whole Language approaches. Each reflects different underlying philosophies and stress different skills. The philosophy underlying the Whole Language approach is that reading is a natural process, much like learning to speak, and that children exposed to a great deal of authentic, connected text will naturally become literate without much in the way of explicit instruction in the rules and conventions of printed text. Phonics advocates argue that in order to learn to read, most children require a great deal of explicit instruction in the rules of printed text. A balanced literacy approach seeks to use the best of both phonics and whole language in order to meet the needs of most readers.

[19] Adapted from http://www.paris.k12.tn.us/~meyerk/overview.htm. Accessed November 2006.

read from a wide range of levels, topics, and genres. While students silently read self-selected reading material, the teacher holds one-on-one conferences with three to five students a day. The teacher keeps a log noting progress, preferences, and responses. Every child should have a one-on-one conference with the teacher every week. At the end of the self-selected reading block the teacher may choose to have a student share, for about two minutes, what they have read and answer a few questions from other students.

*Writing Block* - The purpose of this block is to build fluency in writing, to apply the writing process, to refine and apply knowledge of phonics, and to build students' confidence as writers. This block begins with a mini-lesson where the teacher models real writing incorporating a skill and/or strategy. Students spend time writing on either a self-selected topic or a class assignment. The teacher conducts editing conferences with the scheduled students while the rest of the class writes. Sometimes the session ends with a student sharing their writing and answering a few questions from classmates.

*Working with Words Block* - The purpose of this block is to ensure that all children read, spell, and use high-frequency words correctly, and that they learn the patterns necessary for decoding and spelling. While the lower grades use a word wall covered with the most commonly occurring words, the fourth grade posts a list of the "Nifty Thrifty Fifty" words and the fifth grade posts "Big Words for Big Kids." Words are also introduced from the curriculum. The teacher guides whole class activities to help children learn spelling patterns.

**Reading/Language Arts Instruction in Sue Williams' Classroom**

> I like parts of it; I don't like other parts of it. But you can still kind of make it your own as long as you're doing those four kinds of things...that's a big part of where things come from.

Sue Williams' classroom was bright, orderly, and arranged to create instructional spaces. While a few posters displayed math themes, most of the materials on the walls conveyed that this was a classroom focused on reading and language arts. A teaching station was located in front of a large white board, and included an overhead projector and a pull-down screen. In one corner of the room, shelves lined the wall with books sorted by reading level, topic, and genre. Carpet on the floor, a beanbag chair, director's chair, and small table with four chairs made this a comfortable corner for reading or small group work. Colorful posters on the wall listed editor's marks, steps in the writing process, and book genres. In addition, state standards related to the current instruction were posted on the wall[20]. Student desks had been clustered into groups of four to facilitate collaboration. The room arrangement was changed several times throughout the school year, giving everyone a different vantage point.

*Embedded Assessment Practices*

A typical reading/language arts lesson in Sue Williams' classroom began with self-selected reading. Students chose their own reading matter. While the class read silently, Sue would call one student at a time to read to her and answer comprehension questions about the content of what they had read. Sue kept careful records of what each student chose to read, their fluency, the strategies used, their comprehension, and the level of reading material they chose. She generally completed three to four individual

[20] W.PR.05.04 Constructively and specifically respond orally to the writing of other by identifying sections of the test to improve writing skills.
W.PR.05.05 Independently and collaboratively edit and proofread writing using grade level checklists.
W.PS.05.01 Exhibit individual style and voice to enhance the written message.

conferences in the time allotted for SSR and met with each student individually every two weeks.

For the guided reading segment of the Four Blocks literacy model Sue usually had her students read in pairs or to themselves. Whether the assigned reading selection was from the district selected textbook series or a novel, she used pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading strategies to set the purpose for reading and monitor comprehension throughout the reading process. Class discussion of the reading selection was usually included. Following the reading selection, students were given a short assignment to be completed independently and then shared in pairs. Occasionally, small groups would collectively discuss and compare what each had found. Sue collected these written assignments to monitor student work. Sue also had students write out answers to comprehension questions included in the textbook for each story read. These assignments would be given a point value and become part of the marking period grade. At the completion of a novel, Sue gave a comprehension test. For example, after reading Number the Stars, she gave a test[21] that included matching the character to the correct description, some true or false, some fill in the blank, and an essay question (student chose one of three questions to answer). The score on this test was used as part of the marking period grade.

The writing block of language arts instruction usually began with a mini-lesson on a specific skill or strategy. For example, Sue would teach a short lesson on commas or

[21] Taken from literature unit book accompanying Number the Stars. By Kathy Jordan, published by Teacher Created Materials, Inc. ISBN # 1-55734-424-8

homophones. Another short lesson might be built on a Daily Oral Language[22] example. The mini-lesson would be followed by a writing lesson. Most of these lessons spanned several days, in the manner of the following lessons on writing cross-text analysis. On the first day, Sue read The Legend of the Lady's Slipper.[23] On the second day, she reviewed the previous day's story and elicited from students examples of *courage* that were exhibited in that story. On the second day, she read Brave Irene.[24] Throughout the reading of the story she asked comprehension questions and asked the students to predict what they thought would happen next in the story. After the story, she asked students to suggest ways Irene was brave. She asked value-laden follow-up questions to student responses, such as 'was that foolish,' or 'was she right or wrong?' The class then produced a comparison chart of ways the stories were similar and ways they were different. The next day the school's academic support coach, Mary Locke, modeled for Sue how to go about teaching the writing of cross-text analysis. For this lesson, the support coach also modeled for students by "thinking out loud" as she considered what she would include in her paragraph. The students offered suggestions that were then included in the paragraph. In successive lessons, Sue provided students with different texts that were paired because of some common theme. Students read the stories and, on their own, wrote a cross-text analysis paragraph. These paragraphs were evaluated using the same rubric that would be used to evaluate student writing on the state's assessment test and the district's common assessment test. Other student writing assignments were

[22] Daily Oral Language lessons consist of several sentences that contain grammar or spelling errors. These are displayed to the students (on board or overhead) and read out loud by the teacher. The students then write the sentences correctly. Procedures for DOL vary widely depending on teacher preferences.
[23] The Legend of the Lady's Slipper (2001). Kathy-jo Wargin. Sleeping Bear Press, Chelsea, MI.
[24] Brave Irene (1986). William Steig. Sunburst Book.

also scored using this rubric. The students' scores became part of the marking period grade.

*Poetry Unit*

Sue started her poetry unit with the Haiku. She read the book Haiku Hike,[25] about a class that goes on a hike and writes haiku poems about what they saw on their hike. Using the overhead projector, Sue wrote the requirements for a haiku and displayed samples. She and her students wrote a haiku together. She then distributed a topic poster to students in each group of clustered desks (bird, spring, ground, night, sky). Each group wrote on the poster ideas related to their poster's topic. Students then rotated to the different topic posters until each group had written on each poster. Sue used the poster ideas to help the whole class co-write a haiku about each topic. Students then wrote a haiku of their choice in their writing journal. At the end of class, some of the students read their work to the class.

Sue taught similar lessons for couplets, autobiographical poems, limericks, diamante, and cinquain, having students write their own version of each poem in their writing journal. At the end of the lesson on cinquain, she distributed 4x6 index cards to students. She asked them to write their favorite cinquain on one side of the card and to illustrate it on the other side. Sue made a booklet of these poems to have on display during parent-teacher conferences.

At the end of the unit, Sue had her students type their poems when they were in the computer lab. Sue reviewed them for spelling and grammatical errors. Then each student assembled his or her poems into a booklet. To grade this assignment, Sue created

[25] Haiku Hike. (2005) Fourth Grade Students of St. Mary's Catholic School of Mansfield, Massachusetts. Scholastic, Inc. New York.

a rubric that gave a possible 15 points for each type of poem, additional points for creativity, and points for oral presentation, for a total of 100 points.

As the culminating activity for the poetry unit, the room was rearranged into a "coffee house" atmosphere. Desks were pushed back against the wall, lamps were brought in the room, rugs and cushions were on the floor for seating, and hot chocolate was served. Students took turns sitting on a stool in front of the group reading their poems. Each student read at least one poem that they had written themselves, receiving feedback from classmates.

*Summary of Embedded Assessment Practices of Steve Adams and Sue Williams*

In this section I will identify the assessment practices of each teacher separately. First I will examine the practices of Steve Adams, then I will examine the practices of Sue Williams.

*Summary of Steve Adams' Assessment Practices*

Table 5 summarizes the forms of assessment used by Steve Adams in his fifth grade social studies class and the purpose for which he used the information:

**Steve Adams' Use of Assessment**

**Table 5**

| Purpose: (Across) / Sources of information: (Down) | Grading | Grouping | Lesson Content | Assignment | Promotion/ Retention | Screen for Services |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |
| Last year's teacher | | | | | | |
| Beginning of year diagnostic | | | | | | |
| Daily interactions/Social behavior | | x | | | | |
| Informal/observational assessment | x | x | | | | |
| Teacher designed assessment | x | | | | | |
| Textbook assessment | x | | | | | |
| District assessment | | | | | | |
| State assessment | | | x | x | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Standardized assessment | | | | | | |

**Table 5 Continued**

In order to assign a marking period grade to each student, Steve drew on a number of resources. He used informal, observational assessments of his students; such as the way he monitored his students' work in his economics unit. He used various assessment tools he had designed himself; such as the rubrics he wrote to accompany his lessons on the design and construction of teepees and talismans. He also utilized the summative assessments that accompanied the district-selected textbook series, including both end of chapter questions and the publishing company prepared tests. In some cases he adjusted the chapter tests to more closely match what he had actually taught.

When grouping students, he based his decisions on knowledge he had gathered through daily interactions with students and his understanding of their social interactions with other students. In addition, he sometimes made these choices based on the academic needs of his students. For example, he sometimes paired a "struggling" student with another who "is on top of it" even if they weren't friends. At other times, he asked students who might be "too social" to either work by themselves or with a different partner.

There were no district or standardized assessments of social studies in the fifth grade, so these categories did not apply to Steve. However, he reported that he used what he had come to know over time about the state assessment test to determine both lesson content and the assignments he gave to his students. For example, he reported that the state assessment asked about various Native American tribes and how they lived, and also about early movement over land bridges, so he emphasized this information in his lessons.

This summary shows that Steve Adams was influenced by a number of factors. He used the textbook that was supplied by the district. He supplemented this with materials he either attained himself or gathered from colleagues; in addition he made his own additions to the social studies curriculum. He used personal knowledge of his students that he attained through classroom interactions in order to grade and group his students. He was influenced by his own accumulated teaching experience that told him what could be expected on state assessment tests. So we can see, in the case of Steve, that micro, meso, and macro factors worked together to shape his assessment practices.

*Summary of Sue Williams' Assessment Practices*

Table 6 summarizes the forms of assessment used by Sue Williams in her fifth grade reading/language arts class and the purpose for which she used the information:

**Sue Williams' Use of Assessment**

| Purpose: (Across) | Grading | Grouping | Lesson Content | Assignment | Promotion/ Retention | Screen for Services |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |
| Sources of information: (Down) | | | | | | |
| Last year's teacher | | | | | | |
| Beginning of year diagnostic | | | | | | |
| Daily interactions/Social behavior | | x | | | | |
| Informal/observational assessment | x | x | x | | | |
| Teacher designed assessment | x | | | | | |
| Textbook assessment | x | | x | | | |
| District assessment | | | x | x | | |
| State assessment | | | x | x | | |
| Standardized assessment (SRI) | | | | | | |

**Table 6**

In order to assign a letter grade for her students' reading and language arts work, Sue used several sources of information. Her own informal observations informed her assessment of students' reading comprehension. For example, she found some

discrepancy between the understanding students showed through their written answers to comprehension question and answers they were able to give her during reading conferences. This changed the way she graded some students because she factored in the understanding that was shown in one-on-one conferences even if the student hadn't shown the same understanding in written work. She designed her own assessments, such as the rubric she designed for the poetry unit. She also used the textbook comprehension questions found at the end of each story as a resource for grading students. She recorded the SRI on the report card as mandated by the district, but did not use it to determine their grade. She would not give a student a failing reading grade just because they read below grade level. On the other hand, if a student with high ability did not seem to be putting forth their best effort, she lowered their grade.

When grouping or pairing students to work together she took into account the student's social connections to other students, avoiding putting students together that would enjoy each other's company rather than work on their assignment. In addition, she tried to pair students who would bring different strengths to the task. Sue drew upon her own understanding of her students' reading progress to make grouping decisions; she tried not to put students together whose reading levels were too far apart in ability.

Sue's instructional content was directly influenced by what she learned about her students through both informal and formal assessments. When she noticed in SSR conferences as well as the textbook assessments that her students did not understand the author's purpose or that they had difficulty making inferences, she included more lessons aimed at those skills. Her lesson content was also directly influenced by the state and district's mandated assessments. She made sure that her lessons, especially in writing,

covered the grade level content expectations of both the state and district. In addition, students' assignments were designed to prepare her students to do well on those tests. For example, writing lessons and the student assignment from cross-text analysis lessons would be very familiar to students when they would encounter those questions on the state and district tests.

In this summary, we can see multiple levels of influence on Sue's assessment practice. In grading, she used her own preferences for determining which aspects of student work she would include in the grade as well as the weight afforded to each. She used the knowledge she gained about her students through daily interactions in the social context of the classroom. She was influenced by the school's Four Blocks model for literacy and writing instruction. She also utilized the state assessments' scoring rubric to evaluate students' writing samples. In the case of Sue, we also see micro, meso, and macro influences at work in her assessment practices.

### *Summary*

In sum, my interviews and observations of these teachers show two teachers with very different assessment practices. In part, this difference can be explained by differences in subject matter taught and the teaching experience of the two teachers. As I'll show in the remaining chapters, however, these differences can also be explained by the dynamic interplay of micro, meso, and macro factors that impacted these teachers to varying degrees; each responded to external pressures differently. In the next chapter, I trace the way the state assessment entered into the classrooms of Sue and Steve and impacted the content of their instruction. Further, I identify the mediating influences of both the district and the school on these teachers' responses to the state assessment.

## Chapter Five

### State Assessment Linked to Instruction

One assumption that underlies mandated standardized testing at both federal and state levels is that such tests will help teachers better assess their students' academic progress and guide them in adjusting their instruction to meet the academic needs of their students (Hirsch, 1987, 1996; Bennett, 1988; Ravitch, 1995; Ravitch & Finn, 1987; Smith & O'Day, 1991; Aronowitz, 1996). This chapter explores whether and how mandated state tests helped Sue and Steve assess their students' learning and informed their practice. In contrast to the assumption of policymakers that the state assessment directly informs and improves teachers' practice, this chapter will show that the effects of the state assessment on Steve and Sue's instruction were mediated by district and school policies. The state assessment shaped and informed their instruction, but not directly as is often assumed by policymakers; rather, it entered Sue and Steve's classroom practices through the mandates and resources that the district and school created in response to state assessment. It was further mediated by the teachers' response to these mandates and use of these resources. Whether and how Sue and Steve used these resources depended on the subjects they taught, their relationship to key school actors and, in Sue's case, her own perceptions of the credibility of the resources.

In the next section, I explore the state's assessment policies at the time of this study. Next, I turn to the district and school's responses to these state policies. I then trace how the responses made by the district and the school conditioned Sue and Steve's own responses and use of the state assessment in their teaching.

### *State's Assessment Policies*

The state in which Kensington School exists has aligned its assessment policies with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), commonly called NCLB. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is one of the cornerstones of the NCLB Act. AYP is a measure of a school's year-to year student achievement on the state's assessment tests. Under NCLB, each state must develop annual target goals for AYP. The state must raise the targets in gradual increments with the expectation that 100 percent of the students will demonstrate proficiency on state assessments by the 2013-14 school year. If a school does not attain the target AYP goal, as set by the state, for two or more years in a row, it falls under a plan of consequences and support from the state and is designated a "high priority school."

In addition, the plan of consequences and support differed for Title I or non-Title I schools.[26] Because Kensington School received Title I monies from the federal government, had it not met the state's AYP benchmarks in any two or more consecutive years, it would have been designated a Title I high priority school. Under the state's plan, Kensington School would have been placed on a Phase 1 plan for Title I high priority schools. (See Appendix N for the full plan of consequences and support for Title I high priority schools from the state's Department of Education website.) In each succeeding year that the school did not meet AYP benchmarks, it would have been moved to the next phase of sanctions and support. Under phase 1, the school would be required to notify parents of the school's status and offer them the option of transferring their child/ren to a

[26] Federal Title I funds provide financial assistance to schools with high numbers or high percentages of poor children to help ensure that all children meet state academic standards. Federal funds are allocated through formulas based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state. Source: U.S. Department of Education website

different school with the transportation being provided by the school or district. In addition, the school would be required to write a school improvement plan (SIP) and to use 10% of Title I funds for targeted professional development for teachers. The state's plan offered support for schools in phase 1 by providing Process Monitors who would visit the school four times a year. These monitors would provide a comprehensive needs analysis for the school. The state also provided the School Improvement Framework and the School Improvement Plan template to support the development of the school improvement plan. The full plan (Appendix N) shows that in each consecutive year that a school does not meet AYP, it receives an increasing amount of consequences and support from the state. Each of the elementary schools in the district under study, including Kensington, met the state's AYP requirements and did not fall under the plan of consequences and support.

The state developed a schedule of tests, as shown in table 7, for grades 3-8 based on the requirements of NCLB. NCLB currently requires that testing begin in the third grade. It determines AYP based on school-wide scores in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. While science and social studies are included in the state's testing schedule, these subjects are not included in NCLB mandates.

**Schedule of Subjects Tested on State Assessment**

| Grade | Subjects Tested |
|---|---|
| 3 | English/Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics |
| 4 | ELA, Mathematics |
| 5 | ELA, Mathematics, Science |
| 6 | ELA, Mathematics, Social Studies |
| 7 | ELA, Mathematics |
| 8 | ELA, Mathematics, Science |

**Table 7**

The preceding table shows that in each year from grades three through eight, students are tested in English/Language Arts and mathematics. In fifth and eighth grades they are also tested on science. In the sixth grade, along with ELA and mathematics, they are also tested on social studies. The fifth graders of Kensington School were tested on ELA, mathematics, and science. Steve's students were not given the social studies test in fifth grade because they would take that test the next year in the sixth grade.

The 2005-2006 school year, the year of this study, was the first time that the state assessment moved from a February testing schedule to October. As a result of this schedule change, the time available in the school year to prepare students for the assessment was greatly shortened from a full semester to a few weeks. In addition, the February test in previous years had resulted in confusion over which grade level material was being tested. With the new fall assessment date students were clearly being tested on previous years' instruction, rather than the current year's instruction. The change in schedule from a winter test to a fall test made previous grade levels' teachers more accountable for the assessment results. The winter date of assessment had made teacher accountability ambiguous; especially since the test results were not known until the end of the school year. This did not offer teachers an opportunity to respond to test results and target their instruction for improvement.

## District Responses to State Assessment Policies

Recent research has identified the important role the school district plays in mediating the linkage between federal and state policies aimed at improving student achievement and classroom implementation of such policies. Prior research has

documented how, despite past reform efforts, classroom instruction seemed resistant to significant change (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As the federal government has become more involved in educational policy-making, many states have responded with their own mandates intended to ensure that schools will meet federal AYP requirements. James Spillane (1996) has observed that as the state's role in educational policy-making expands, the district's policy-making expands also.

> As [states] establish stronger and more coherent policies at the state level in support of ambitious outcomes...they are likely to provide occasions for district instructional policy making. The result is more, rather than less, guidance for classroom teachers. (Spillane, p.83)

This section describes the various policies enacted by the central administration of Kensington School's district, illustrating Spillane's argument of the proliferation of policy making at the district level in response to the state's policy making. Further, the principal of Kensington School, Ms. Mathews, added her own mandates to those already in place from the state and the district. The result of all this policy making created more layers of mandates for Kensington's teachers.

At the time of this study, the ten elementary schools in Kensington's school district continued to meet AYP requirements. The district took a number of steps intended to ensure that this would continue each year. First, it adopted district-wide textbook series for reading. According to Mary Locke, who was appointed to serve as Kensington's academic support coach, the reading texts were chosen because they most closely matched the content and skills tested on the yearly state assessments. The district adopted the Scholastic reading series for elementary reading instruction in all buildings district-wide. Along with this book series, the district required that its schools use the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), a computer-based reading assessment that equates a

student's reading performance to a Lexile score. The district mandated that elementary teachers administer the SRI twice a year and record the equivalent Lexile score on students' report cards.

It was unclear whether the other textbook series were chosen in response to NCLB mandates, but the district required schools to use common texts. The district adopted the Everyday Math series, commonly called Chicago Math, as the basis for math instruction across the district. For social studies, the district adopted the McMillan/McGraw-Hill textbook series. At the time of this study, the series had been in use in the district for more than a decade, so its use predated NCLB.

The district also required quarterly and semester common assessments in math and writing. The district assessments were prepared by the curriculum department and presented to all the principals at a district-wide meeting; the responsibility for making sure these tests were administered fell to the principals. According to Ms. Mathews, Kensington's principal, these tests were designed to test how well students met the state standards in the reading and math.

In response to the state adding third grade to its testing regime in the 2005-2006 school year, and the addition of the ELA test in the fifth grade, the district assigned a central-district administrator to write "20-day Plans" for the different subjects covered by the tests. These plans were to be used by teachers from the beginning of the school year up until the week prior to the state assessment, when the state disallowed test preparation. 20-day Plan notebooks were produced for reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies and distributed to all teachers in the district who taught these subjects in the tested grades.

The district also implemented the Fast ForWord[27] program at each building that received Title I money. The program represented a district effort to maintain AYP by directly targeting low-scoring students. Seven of the district's ten elementary buildings, including Kensington, were Title I schools and used the Fast ForWord program at the time of this study. Fast ForWord provided reading support for students in kindergarten through the fifth grades. Students received computer-based instruction during the school day if their SRI score was below grade level or after school on a voluntary basis if students chose to participate.

In addition, the district required each school to have a School Improvement Plan (SIP), even if it had met AYP. According to Ms. Mathews, Kensington's principal, the rationale for this was that each school needed to have a plan in place to continue to meet the changing benchmarks set by the state each year.

**School Responses to District and State Policies**

The district's response to the state assessment and NCLB sanctions conditioned the school-level responses primarily through district curricular policies. The principal reinforced district mandates and teachers utilized the various curricular and testing resources the district made available. The school's response was also shaped by the principal's own efforts to maintain AYP and improve test scores, and to do so within the context of being a new principal.

In Kensington School, Ms. Mathews responded to the district's accountability goals by making sure that the teachers in the building enacted and followed through with district goals and mandates. In particular, she monitored the administration of the

[27] Fast ForWord is a phonemic awareness, computer-based program that teaches students to hear the sounds so they can read better.

district's common assessments and reported the results to the district. She also mandated that teachers complete the entire district-developed math curriculum during the school year. In prior years, only one math journal was completed instead of the two included in the district's adopted curriculum. She, along with Mary Locke, provided planning assistance to the teachers to make sure they implemented the 20-Day Plan books prior to the state assessment. Finally, Ms. Mathews monitored the SRI test results and identified low-scoring students who needed to participate in the Fast ForWord reading support program.

Ms. Mathews also expanded on the district goals by implementing her own policies aimed at improving school-wide reading scores. This study took place in the second year of Ms. Mathews' tenure as principal in Kensington School. During her first year at Kensington, she had observed that several teachers were using the Four Blocks Model for reading instruction. Because she believed that the Four Blocks Model would support district and school goals of improved student reading performance, in her second year as principal Ms. Mathews required all teachers in Kensington School to implement the Four Blocks Model. Thus, while the district required the use of the Scholastic reading textbook, the use of the Four Blocks Model was a requirement of the Kensington principal[28].

Interestingly, while she had taken steps to enforce the use of the Four Blocks framework for reading instruction, Ms. Mathews had tempered those steps, recognizing her status as a new leader in the school. Most of the teachers at Kensington School had been on the staff since the building opened in 1990. The majority of the teaching staff

[28] Four Blocks was being used at some of the other elementary buildings at the discretion of the building principal.

had a long history of working together as a cohesive team. Five teachers who taught at the third, fourth, and fifth grades were newer additions to the teaching staff. At a staff meeting Ms. Mathews told the staff that she had not mandated that teachers strictly conform to the program's 150-minute Four Blocks block schedule. According to the program's framework, all teachers, across the whole school, would be required to teach reading and writing for 150 minutes each day without interruptions or pullouts. As Ms. Mathews noted during a staff meeting, "I felt that if I had walked in as a second year principal and implemented that across the board, it would have gone over like a brick. If you'd like to look at that, we can. I'm not making that decision without your support" (KC.SIP.06.03.20).

Ms. Mathews provided additional technical support for reading instruction in her building by devoting a large portion of her budget to contract with Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes to bring their program to Kensington School. Ms. Mathews intended to use the Lindamood-Bell program to bring below-grade-level readers up to state standards on the state assessment. She did get district support for this program through the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum who paid for a portion of the teacher training out of the district budget. Lindamood-Bell trainers taught the Kensington teachers how to administer batteries of standardized reading tests and how to group students for reading instruction based on the results. Ms. Mathews selected the students who would receive the services of this program. She was constrained by space and a limited number of instructors available at any one time, so she limited the program to grades 1-4. Beginning at the lowest grades, she selected students who were reading below grade level according to the SRI, and included as many students as could be accommodated. Ms. Mathews

rationalized the implementation of Lindamood-Bell as a means of meeting the needs of students who were not being served in another way. As she noted in an interview, it was intended for "kids who fall through the cracks. They don't qualify for special ed[ucation], but they aren't at grade level." It was through Ms. Mathews' determination that the program was implemented, teachers were trained, and money was found in the budget to support the program.

Another change Ms. Mathews implemented that was not directly related to the state assessment, but which had consequences for Sue and Steve's relationship with the state assessment was departmentalization at the fifth grade level. Ms. Mathews saw that Kensington School was the only elementary in the district that had not departmentalized instruction for the fifth grades. While the fourth grade teachers at Kensington had self-selected to departmentalize some of their instruction the year before Ms. Mathews arrived, the fifth grade teachers had not. At the end of her first year as principal at Kensington, a veteran fifth grade teacher retired. Ms. Mathews saw this as an opportunity to enact a change that would put Kensington fifth grade students on par with fifth grade students in other elementary buildings in the district. She took the initiative and approached Steve about departmentalizing instruction of the core subjects. He did not oppose the change because it allowed him to elect to teach science and social studies, while jettisoning reading/language arts and math. The reorganization of the fifth grade meant that, by choosing to teach science and social studies, Steve was no longer teaching the subjects that were the focus of state and federal testing mandates and accountability policies. It also meant that the new teacher, Sue, was responsible for teaching reading,

writing, and math, all of which were closely monitored under NCLB regulations, the state department of education, as well as the district.

***Mary Locke: A Key Player in Implementing District and School Policies***

Along with Ms. Mathews, Mary Locke was also central in shaping the school's response to the state assessment. She held a unique position. Mary was one of the original faculty members who remained on the staff since the school's opening in 1990. At the time of the study, she was also serving as a quasi-district figure. She was in her second year as a district appointed academic support coach[29] at Kensington and one other elementary building in the district. In this capacity, Mary worked closely with the principals to provide support to the teachers in the form of teaching demonstration lessons, providing lesson planning ideas and materials, observing teachers' instruction and giving feedback. According to Mary, while her position was to support all instruction, most of her time was spent supporting the teaching of reading and writing. In her position as an academic coach, Mary became a central link between the state assessment, the district response and teachers' classroom practices. She played a key role in the implementation of both district and school-level policies at Kensington School.

In order to understand Mary Locke's unique, dual position as both district employee and faculty member of Kensington School, it is necessary to know how she fit in with the original faculty members and the school's mission. With twenty-four years of teaching experience at the time of this study, she had taught fourth grade at Kensington School for fourteen years. The first principal of Kensington School had selected the original staff for the building. She hired teachers who "would give 110%," according to

[29] The district created the academic support coach position to support instruction in the Title I buildings in the district. Academic support coaches were assigned to cover more than one building.

another teacher who was brought to Kensington School in 1990. The school operated under a site-based management arrangement in which the district placed much of the decision-making power at the building level. The principal encouraged teachers to collaborate and bring ideas to the whole school. At the beginning of each school year the teachers decided together on the learning goals for the year. Many school-wide learning projects were implemented over the years. One year the theme was "under the sea." The school's lobby was transformed into an under sea world, with murals on the walls and sea life art projects hanging from the ceiling. Each class contributed to the project based on what was developmentally appropriate for the grade level. Teachers were encouraged to bring their personal interests and passions into these projects. Mary Locke and another teacher went to space camp in Alabama one year and brought back the idea of a simulated space launch, which became a yearlong project for the school. Another year, Mary Locke went to a rain forest in Costa Rica to learn about that environment. When she came back and shared with the faculty, the theme for the school year became the rain forest. Another year, after she experienced spelunking the school lobby was turned into a cave with stalactites and stalagmites as part of the whole-school project. Mary thus had a long history of being an instructional leader in Kensington.

Mary brought this same passion and excitement to her instruction of reading and writing. After hearing about Four Blocks being used by a teacher in another school in the district, she requested permission for herself and another Kensington teacher to observe in that teacher's classroom. Her principal granted them professional development time to make this observation possible. According to Mary, she "picked [the teacher's] brain" and came back to Kensington very excited about Four Blocks. She read everything she

could find about Four Blocks over the summer. The next year, she convinced her fourth grade teaching partner that they should use the Four Blocks model in their classrooms.

> That particular year we did not have a reading coach or reading teacher and our principal had heard about [someone who presented a Four Blocks workshop]. [The Four Blocks presenter] and I talked quite a bit and she was just giving me more information on Four Blocks pieces that I didn't have from my reading. I embraced it all. My partner teacher came along. He wasn't quite in the same place I was but he was very willing to come along. Together we realized we had a huge job in front of us...We came up with a formula for how we were going to get these kids where they needed to go [using Four Blocks].

In the same way that Mary had shared her interest in science with other teachers in the building, she also shared the Four Blocks model and her experience with it. Other teachers in the building began using Four Blocks. When Ms. Mathews became principal of Kensington School, she observed that Four Blocks was an effective way to teach reading so she mandated that every teacher in Kensington School would use the Four Blocks model for reading instruction.

Mary worked closely with Ms. Mathews to support the latter's efforts to maintain AYP and to improve assessment results. In an interview, Mary discussed her work with Ms. Mathews in helping the teachers improve their reading instruction.

> Our principal is seeing success. Now this is just her second year, but she is feeling that we need to expect that more and more. The teachers who have embraced [Four Blocks] wholeheartedly are doing wonderful things. Part of the problem...is a teacher may say 'I am teaching Four Blocks,' but they don't embrace all of the structure. They may say 'I am doing this, but I don't really like that part.' Then that impacts the whole thing. So that is really where our principal wants to ferret out those little things that are not completely in line with the structure and then we are going to look at those. KC.rconML.06.01.31

Together, Ms. Mathews and Mary Locke took on both a support role, as well as an oversight role to ensure that the Four Blocks model would be used correctly. While Mary

provided support in the way of demonstrated lessons, lesson ideas and materials, Ms. Mathews also visited classrooms often to make sure the mandated literacy model was being implemented as it should be.

Mary also worked with Ms. Mathews to support teachers in their instruction of writing. While she was happy that the district had provided the 20-Day plan notebooks, she felt that teachers needed follow-up throughout the school year to support their practice.

> My concern is the district really got on the bandwagon and developed [the 20-Day plan], but once the [state assessment] was done, how have we supported our teachers? We have not...I am happy that the principal here has said let's give them support. KC.rconML.06.01.31

> [The 20-day plan didn't take] into account that we didn't actually have 20 days [to prepare for the state assessment]. In this building we did that as best we could and then the principal asked that I take [20-day plan] and break it down for 3rd, 4th and 5th... I have a 20-day extended plan for just thinking of Six Traits, Content and Ideas. I did that for 3rd, 4th, and 5th and I even did one for 2nd because they need to be getting on the same page. That started in November and it ends today[30], however, not all of those teachers have even completed that 20-day plan. Then I have another one ready that I haven't even given to them for February. That will be focusing on organization and then there will be a March and an April and May will just be reflecting on things that we need to still be doing. KC.rconML.06.01.31

She further supported both the district and the principal's goals to achieve better performance on the state assessment for writing. The district required that student writing be evaluated using the same rubrics that are used to evaluate student writing on the state assessment. Mary brought rubrics to teachers when she taught demonstration lessons in their classrooms. She revealed her belief in the importance of the scoring rubrics when she made a presentation on writing to teachers at an SIP meeting. Mary told the teachers,

[30] End of January

"You don't need to score every piece of writing, but you need to score writing regularly using the [state assessment] rubric in order to drive your instruction" (KC.rconML.06.05.30).

Mary's role as academic support coach supported both the district's goal of meeting NCLB and state AYP requirements and the principal's mandates and goal of maintaining AYP and improving student performance on the state assessments.

I turn next to look at a specific meeting that illustrates how both Mary Locke and the school principal critically shaped the school's response to state and district assessment policies.

***Shaping Building-wide Response to Assessment Results***

In this section, I describe one school improvement meeting that Ms. Mathews led in which the faculty discussed the state assessment results and decided upon steps for improvement. This meeting shows both Ms. Mathews and Mary Locke's role in linking the state assessment, the district response, and the school's own response and in fostering teachers aligning their instruction with each. The two women worked to both enforce and expand upon district instructional mandates. As part of that, Ms. Mathews negotiated the space between wanting teachers to meet expectations and also giving them opportunities for input and collaboration. It is important to note that this meeting shows how, in some ways, the school supported and reinforced the district's mandates, such as enforcing the district's math curriculum by requiring teachers to complete both math journals, while in other ways they seemed to overlap and duplicate each other, such as with the Lindamood-Bell program that seemed to be directed at the same students as the district's Fast ForWord program. Ultimately, the school's response to the state assessments and the

district's mandates provided the teachers with both an array of instructional resources as well as some additional mandates that constrained their work.

In the first interview I had with Ms. Mathews, she stated her main goal for Kensington School was that it would be a school with "high expectations and equal expectations for all students" (KC.prinWA.05.10.26). In the meeting I describe in this section, she attempted to move the teachers beyond deficit models some held of their students in order to improve instruction for all students. She used state assessment results to push the teachers to change their instruction.

Ms. Mathews devoted the first SIP meeting following the release of the fall 2005 state assessment results to examining those results with the teachers. She presented a report of Kensington students' scores to the teachers. Her report compared Kensington's performance to the nine other elementary buildings in the district. Table 8 indicates the rank order of Kensington out of the ten elementary schools in the district.

**Kensington's Rank Order Among District Elementary Schools on Fall 2005 State Assessment Tests**

| Grade | Reading | Writing | ELA[31] | Math | Science |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3rd | #8 | #8 | #8 | #5 | |
| 4th | #7 | #8 | #7 | #5 | |
| 5th | #5 | #9 | #5 | #4 | #4[32] |

**Table 8**

Table 8 shows that Kensington School's third graders ranked near the bottom (number eight out of ten) of the district's elementary schools in reading, writing, and ELA. The fourth graders ranked near the bottom in reading, writing and ELA (numbers eight and

[31] The ELA assessment includes reading, writing, speaking, and viewing/listening strands. In this report, Ms. Mathews has separated reading and writing out from the overall ELA scores and listed them separately.

[32] Only fifth grade students took the science test.

seven out of ten). However, the fifth graders scored in the middle of the pack (number five out of ten) in both reading and ELA. The most glaring weakness for the whole school was apparent in the results of the writing assessment. Looking at this table across grade levels it is apparent that each grade had a problem with the writing assessment (they were numbers eight and nine out of ten). This is a subject that Ms. Mathews addressed specifically in the meeting that is described below. In addition, looking across grade levels, we see that the Kensington students performed their best overall on the math assessment. The math assessment showed an improvement over the previous years' scores in math, according to Ms. Mathews' report. She attributed this improvement to the school's efforts over the previous school year to provide teachers with professional development in Chicago Math instruction as well as her personal goal of having the teachers cover the entire math curriculum for their grade.

When the teachers had finished looking over their ranking in the district for the various subjects, Ms. Mathews asked them what they thought affected the assessment scores most. One teacher suggested that there were students who were learning the English language. Ms. Mathews responded that only three of Kensington's students were from a home where English was not spoken. Another teacher suggested that transient students from the apartments and duplexes were a problem. Ms. Mathews countered that the transience rate was only 12%. After pointing out that two other elementary buildings in the district with lower SES and more diverse student populations had performed better than Kensington, she told her teachers "We have to stop blaming our changing population for poor scores. I don't want to call it race. It's SES. Poor is poor. But the SES argument is gone when you look at these other schools" (KC.SIP.06.03.20).

She then distributed a handout containing the breakdown of Kensington's scores by grade level (Appendix O). Her report identified the number of students at each grade level who were deficient on various test items. She specifically pointed out the results of the writing test on which the scores were lowest. The teachers were given time to look over the results for their grade level. Ms. Mathews asked the teachers how they felt after looking it over. "Not good," one said. "Tired. We work so hard," said another. Ms. Mathews then acknowledged that they did work hard and that she knew she had a "fantastic" staff. "I'm not going to sugar coat what this looks like. We have to stop blaming our changing population for our scores when two other schools with similar populations did better than us."

Ms. Mathews continued to focus the discussion on the writing scores, which were poor at every grade level. One teacher asked, "Are we going to hit this like we did math?" Ms. Mathews responded that she was willing to try "everything" but wanted to be careful how they implemented it "because it has to be supported." The teachers wanted to know what the top ranked elementary building in the district was doing that they weren't. Ms. Mathews shared that the principal of that school went into every classroom every week, scheduled a 150-minute block of time for Four Blocks instruction that was uninterrupted, and she scheduled what her teachers taught every day.

During this meeting, the teachers agreed that writing was the lowest test score of all the subjects tested, and that the greatest weakness in their writing was including details. In order to help students with this weakness in their writing, Mary Locke introduced Structure Words[33] that were to be used to help students include more details in

[33] Bell, Nanci. (1991) *Visualizing and Verbalizing: For Language Comprehension and Thinking.* Nancibell, Inc. Revised Ed.

their writing. Every teacher was given a folder with overheads and structure word cards to support their instruction of the structure words with their students. The structure words were: what, color, shape, movement, background, when, size, number, where, mood, perspective, and sound. Ms. Mathews directed the teachers to teach their students to use the structure words. She suggested that they preface their lessons saying something like, "This is why it is important to visualize when we read." One teacher reported that she had taught one lesson to her class using the structure words to describe a picture of a pig.[34] She had her students provide descriptors about the pig's picture for each of the structure words. The principal also suggested that it would be good to have "reading buddies" use the structure words to have their reading partner answer questions about their reading selection. After being introduced to the structure words in a whole class activity and with some practice with partners, teachers were to include structure words in writing assignments. The assignment could be as simple as asking students to write a paragraph about what they did during recess, using the structure words to support their statements.

The principal then asked the teachers to incorporate these structure words into their lessons right away. They were to be used at every grade level in order that all students would be familiar with the words and would come to use them to add details to their writing. Ms. Mathews asked how often it would be reasonable for everyone to teach a structure word lesson. The consensus of the teachers was that they would conduct a lesson using the structure words once a week for the remaining weeks of the school year. The principal announced that a sign-up sheet would be in the lounge in order to have

[34] Structure words must have been discussed or introduced at some other point, because this teacher had already taught one lesson using structure words. It is not clear whether Mary Locke or Ms. Mathews had arranged for this lesson to be brought up at the SIP meeting or whether the teacher did it on her own.

either Mary Locke or the principal come in to teach a demonstration lesson for any teacher who wanted support to get started.

In addition, at this meeting the principal asked the teachers if it would be helpful to have a plan for writing lessons for the remainder of the school year. The collective response was positive. Ms. Mathews asked Mary Locke to develop a writing plan to be distributed to the third, fourth and fifth grade teachers that would ensure that each of the different forms of writing that are covered on the state assessment would get covered by the teachers. Appendix P shows the writing plan created by Mary Locke for the months of April and May. Taking into account a week for spring break and a week for parent-teacher conferences, this plan included lessons for seven weeks of writing instruction. The plan covered all the different forms of writing covered on the state assessment. The focus on each of the forms of writing, personal narrative, peer reflection, cross-text writing, stars and wishes, reflects the fact that the state assessment assesses each of these forms of writing. Shortly after this meeting, Ms. Mathews added one further mandate. Teachers were required to turn in their weekly lesson plans for writing for Ms. Mathews to review.

Thus, this SIP meeting shows how the school responded to the district's mandates and the AYP expectations under NCLB. Both the district and the school generated numerous curricular and instructional mandates in response to the state assessment and NCLB's focus on reading, writing and math scores. The following table illustrates the ways in which the district and the school instituted policies intended to ensure that AYP would be maintained and that student performance on the state assessment would improve.

## Summary

**District and School Responses to NCLB and State Policies**

| | DISTRICT | SCHOOL |
|---|---|---|
| Reading | •District-wide textbook series<br>•SRI<br>•Fast ForWords<br>•20-day plan | •Four Blocks Model<br>•Lindamood-Bell |
| Writing | •District 20-Day Plan<br>•District Common Assessment<br>•State Assessment Rubrics | •Structure Words<br>•School Writing Plan<br>•Turn in Lesson Plans for Review |
| Math | •District-wide textbook series<br>•20-day Plan<br>•District Common Assessment | •Enforce District Policy |

**Table 9**

Table 9 summarizes the way the state assessment and federal NCLB policy produced a proliferation of responses at both the district and school levels. In order to meet AYP requirements in reading, the district adopted a common textbook series for reading instruction, mandated that the SRI be administered and recorded on report cards, it instituted the use of Fast ForWords in the Title I schools, and it produced 20-day plan notebooks for teachers to prepare their students for the assessment. In addition, the school's principal added the mandate of the Four Blocks model for reading instruction, and she added the Lindamood-Bell program for students who read below grade level according to the SRI.

In order to meet AYP requirements in the area of writing, the district produced 20-day plan notebooks, instituted a district-wide common assessment in writing, and required that the state assessment writing rubrics be used to assess students' writing. In response to her school's performance on the state assessment, Ms. Mathews mandated the use of structure words to get more detail into student writing, and she had Mary Locke

create a school writing plan that would ensure that teachers covered all the forms of writing covered on the state assessment. She also required teachers to turn in their writing lesson plans so she could review them each week.

The district's response to the state assessment on math was to adopt a common curriculum for math instruction throughout the district, produce 20-day plan notebooks that would help teachers prepare their students for the assessment, and they instituted a common assessment for math district-wide. Ms. Mathews did not add to these mandates, rather she enforced the district's curriculum by requiring that teachers cover the entire curriculum by teaching from both math journals.

### *Teachers' Responses to District and Building Mandates*

In order to gain an understanding of the building-wide context and teachers' responses to district and building level mandates, I interviewed and observed third and fourth grade teachers in addition to Steve and Sue who taught the fifth grade. This section specifically looks at the responses of the other teachers in Kensington School to the layers of mandates they had to react to in the day-to-day choices they made in their classrooms. The responses of these teachers varied.[35]

Mary Locke reported that the initial response to the district's 20-day plan notebooks that she heard from the teachers was "you've got to be kidding" and "we have only so many hours in the day. How do you expect us to accomplish this?" She sensed that the frustration on the teachers' part, especially in the content area of writing, was due to the fact that the expectations were "huge."

[35] The responses of the third through fifth grade teachers to mandates were revealed in interviews. None of the kindergarten through second grade teachers, who all had been teaching at Kensington School since 1990, was included in the study.

> It wasn't in just writing for knowledge and experience. It was writing in cross-text; it was knowledge of genres; it was knowledge of stars and wishes; it was knowledge of revising; knowledge of informational text. It was huge. To have all of this along with starting the year, getting to know your students, and all of the stuff that we have going was awful [for them]. KC.rconML.06.01.31

In addition to being overwhelmed, there was frustration because the district's plans did not take into account that they really didn't have 20 school days to present the material contained in the notebooks. Without revealing who she was talking about, Mary Locke related that a teacher told her, "I felt kind of angry at first, but as I've spent time with it, I see it makes sense. There is value in it" (KC.rconML.06.01.31). Despite their apparent frustration, the teachers of Kensington School seemed to give their best effort to use the district's 20-day plans, as far as I could tell by everything I was told and observed.

Two of the teachers expressed concerns with the district's Fast ForWords program. One veteran third grade teacher and a new-to-Kensington fourth grade teacher were critical of the program's expense. One teacher noted, "We're spending money on computer programs when we should be spending money on more teachers" (KC.GM.06.02.22). Only these two teachers criticized the program in my interviews and observations. The other teachers had little if anything to say about it. Further, teachers' opinions didn't have any impact on the delivery of the Fast ForWord program. It was taught as a pull-out program during the school day or as an after school program for students who chose to participate.

There were some signs of resistance by some teachers to building-level mandates. For example, Ms. Mathews reported that she met with some negative reactions when she required that teachers finish the entire district adopted math curriculum.

> Last year was the first time they were supposed to finish journal two and there was some resistance. 'We can't do this.' I thought, I've seen research and data from buildings [where they] do get through journal two and we are going to do this. KC.PrinWA.06.06.16

Ms. Mathews saw the state assessment results as proof that her teachers had complied with her mandate.

Four Blocks presented a challenge to one new-to-Kensington teacher. In an interview, he related that Mary Locke had been working with him to get "up to speed" on Four Blocks. "[Mary] has been telling me that she's been really invested in this effort...and in the training of the teachers" (KC.4GM.06.02.22).

> I'm trying to fit myself into this Four Block format. It's been a difficult process but it will be worth it because Four Blocks is not going away. KC.4GM.06.02.22

While he was working to adopt the Four Blocks method, it didn't seem that he believed that it was the best way to instruct his students in reading. Rather, he was adopting Four Blocks because he was resigned to the fact that it would not go away. Further, his classroom provided an interesting look at the intersection of the district's mandated textbook and the building level mandate of Four Blocks. Admitting that he had been "floundering" trying to become accustomed to material that was new to him, on his own he acquired a teacher's manual for the textbook he had taught from in his previous school. He typed up and made copies of stories from that textbook and distributed them to his students for reading instruction. Thus, while he was trying to accommodate the building-mandated Four Blocks format of reading instruction, he chose to forgo the district-mandated textbook. He may have needed the 'stable ground' offered by the familiar reading textbook on which he could feel 'solid footing' while dealing with so many new materials and mandates at once.

Another teacher, who had taught at Kensington for eight years, expressed generalized dismay about mandated testing. She shared in an interview her feeling that the state assessment had changed the way teaching was done in her classroom.

> It's very much more business-like. There is no room for fun anymore. I used to give the state test and then not pay attention to it anymore. I could get down to what I really wanted to teach...It used to be that by this time of year[36] I had finished teaching what I had to teach and we could do some fun things. Now, because of high-stakes tests, it is much more high stress. There is much more pressure to continue the teaching to the last day of school. KC.4NL.06.05.15

This interview revealed that at one point in her teaching career, she was able to pretty much ignore the state assessment. She administered the test and then forgot it. It didn't impact what she taught in her classroom. The change had come about with the NCLB and AYP requirements that she referred to as "high-stakes testing." She had not considered the state assessment a high stakes test when she was able to give the test and forget about it. Now, she was forced to pay closer attention to the content of her lessons and felt that she needed to remain focused on that content throughout the entire school year.

Further, she wasn't persuaded that the overlapping mandates and programs intended to support reading and writing were the answer to her students' difficulties.

> We have done this Four Blocks thing for a few years and it's like we're almost giving them too much. I don't know if they can't understand it, or if we're doing too many things...trying to teach them leads, and then teach them paragraphing, and then teach them this and...I just can't get this writing thing going. I just think we are trying to do everything at one time and maybe we are overloading them somehow...Mary Locke comes in and sometimes I think the kids are almost confused because she comes in and teaches something and then I try to re-teach or do my thing. Now we have this Patricia[37] coming in teaching about visualization. So sometimes I think, 'are they totally confused on who's doing what, or how this is all connected, or are some connecting it?' I mean, for me, I don't know if that's more confusing or if it's helpful for some. I mean they seem to be,

[36] Mid-May
[37] From Lindamood-Bell

> some of them seem to be catching on, but there's some that are still struggling. So I don't know. It's just different. Different ideas, different strategies, different people...It's good and bad I guess. Sometimes it's not as consistent as if you were trying on your own. KC.4NL.06.05.15

This revealing portion of the interview illustrates the plight faced by the teachers at Kensington School. Even though the teachers tried to accommodate the wide variety of programs going on in the school, the problem for them was the abundance of programs coming at them at once. They were dealing with several different mandates and resources, each bringing different people in and out of their rooms. This teacher posits that perhaps the students were confused by all of this. It seems that she was being pulled in several directions at once as she tried to meet the demands that were placed on her. While the state, district and school mandates provided additional resources for the teachers, they also constrained teachers' own decision making in their classrooms. The problem this teacher pointed out was that she was unable to assert any kind of coherence or consistency in her classroom with so many people and programs in her classroom at once. The ultimate question posed by this teacher, but faced by all of the teachers was, is this helpful? Did it help her teach her students the content they needed to know?

This seemed to be the modal response of the teachers in Kensington School. They were inundated by mandates and programs, each of which they tried to accommodate. The mandates of the state resulted in district level mandates. The mandates of the district resulted in more policy making at the building level. The teachers, while being provided with resources to meet the mandates, were constrained by these mandates in the choices they could make in their classrooms.

In the next two sections, I show how the state, district and school-level mandates, described above, entered Steve and Sue's classrooms. As each of these teachers tried to accommodate the policies and mandates there were similarities in their responses, but there were differences as well. Part of the difference can be accounted for in the way each asserted their individual discretion in the face of co-existing demands and mandates.

**The State Assessment and Reading and Writing in Sue's Fifth Grade Class**

I observed several ways in which the state assessment entered into and shaped Sue's reading and writing instruction. The state assessment was carried into her practice through district and school-level mandates and resources. Sue's relationships with Mary Locke and the principal influenced her adherence to these mandates. Working closely with her mentor, Sue took up and used all of the resources that were made available to her. However, she still exerted some discretion over the way in which she used them.

***Relationships that Influenced Sue's Practice.*** Sue's relationship with Mary Locke began shortly after Sue was hired the preceding summer. Mary had Sue come to her house to give her instruction in Four Blocks. At school, the two worked together before, during, and after school hours on plans and materials for both reading and writing instruction. In an interview at the end of the school year, Sue described the ways Mary had helped her.

> She is my mentor and also our academic support coach. I've been able to go to her whenever I need something. Even with math, because she taught here for so long and she knows the program, at a different grade level, but she knows the program. So I've been able to kind of pull ideas from her too and especially with that language arts stuff. I can say, 'What am I doing?' and at report card time [when I had one parent angry with me,] I went to Mary and said, 'What do I do?' She has been a big support for me just with any kind of question I have had. KC.5SW.06.05.16

Sue's relationship with Mary even seemed to influence the attitude she brought to her work. Sue embraced the Four Blocks model with the same enthusiasm that Mary exhibited. Sue also echoed Mary's opinion of the district-mandated textbook. In interviews, Mary stated that the Scholastic textbook was a "good series" that included "so many materials for reading and writing." Sue described her feelings about the textbook saying, "It's a nice series because it has a lot to pull in for writing and other things."

Through her interviews, it was apparent that Sue had a profound professional respect for Ms. Mathews as a principal. Sue described Ms. Mathews as an "amazing principal." In another interview she noted that Ms. Mathews "gives us the support we need to succeed." One specific instance of support Sue cited was that Ms. Mathews made sure that Sue received as much professional development as she requested. Beyond their professional relationship, Sue developed a personal relationship with Ms. Mathews through the activities such as faculty potlucks, "payday" events in the lounge, as well as socializing before and after school. Through observations of them in the school the two seemed to have a positive and easygoing relationship.

Through her close work with Mary Locke and her good relationship with Ms. Mathews, Sue seemed to accept whatever mandate was put before her. She made no negative comments about either district or building level mandates. Mary's role as academic support coach put her in the position of representing both the district and the school; her role as Sue's mentor put her in a close working relationship with Sue. In part, Sue's acceptance of the district and building level mandates could have come from a sense of obligation to Mary for the time she had devoted to helping Sue. In addition,

Sue's friendly relationship with Ms. Mathews may have influenced her acceptance of building level mandates. Following the SIP meeting previously described, Sue's goals for her own classroom instruction in writing seemed to be the same as the principal's goals for the school.

***State Assessment Influences on Reading Instruction.*** The state assessment of reading influenced the content of reading lessons in Sue's classroom. The state assessment traveled into Sue's classroom through the mediating influences of both the district and the school. The district mediated the state assessment's influence by adopting the Scholastic reading series, which seemed to most closely match the objectives of the yearly state assessment in reading. The content of Sue's reading instruction was prescribed by the district-adopted textbook series. It served as the main source of reading material for her students. In addition to using the stories for guided reading, she used the end-of-story comprehension questions and writing prompts. The textbook series, by way of the district mandate, thus linked the state assessment and the content of Sue's reading instruction.

At the school level, Ms. Mathews and Mary Locke actively transported the state assessment into Sue's classroom by way of the Four Blocks model of reading instruction as well as by encouraging use of the district's 20-Day plan. Sue used her discretion when she added the reading of a novel to the reading content for her students. Mary Locke, who helped her adapt the materials accompanying the novel to the Four Blocks model, supported Sue in this.

Both the district and the school influenced the way Sue conducted her reading instruction. The district's 20-day Plan for reading was designed to ensure that the

appropriate material would be reviewed and taught prior to the administration of the state assessment. In contrast to the frustration that had been expressed by some other teachers, Sue responded to the 20-day plan saying, it was "nice" that the district played a big role in making sure that teachers were prepared with material that would help get students ready to take the state assessment "because we don't know what's on it and it's different every year" (KC.5SW.05.12.08). Sue felt that the plan pretty much included topics that she normally would have taught, with the exception of one--genre. Genre was included in the 20-Day Plan because it had been taught in the fourth grade and could, therefore, be included on the state test. At the school level, Sue's reading instruction was shaped by Ms. Mathews' mandate that the Four Blocks model be used for reading instruction. As she noted in an interview, Ms. Mathews believed that it provided the best format for reading instruction that would assure the school continued to meet AYP and would, ultimately, help students perform better on the state assessment of reading. Mary Locke was an active agent in getting Sue, as well as the other teachers school-wide, to use Four Blocks by demonstrating lessons in classrooms. Further, as Sue's mentor, she had instructed Sue in the finer points of Four Blocks in one-on-one training sessions over the previous summer. Mary spent a lot of time with Sue, before, during, and after school working together on plans. Mary helped Sue adjust her plans for the district-adopted textbook to fit the Four Blocks format. In addition, Mary helped Sue adapt materials when she had her students read a novel. (Four Blocks and Sue's use of it in her classroom was described in detail in chapter four.)

In addition, the state assessment influenced the way Sue assessed student learning. The district adopted the Scholastic reading series because it perceived the series

to be most closely aligned with the state standards. Along with this series, the district mandated that the SRI be given to students each marking period. This test was used to determine whether students were reading below-, at-, or above-grade level. Sue met the district's mandate by administering the SRI and recording it on report cards, but she didn't *use* the SRI because she didn't really trust it as a reliable gauge of reading level.

> I don't feel like it's the most accurate. I had a student who tested very, very, low--below grade level and she is a very high reader. We retested her and she was high... Then sometimes I think they aren't as low as they tested on that test. KC.5SW.05.12.08

Sue preferred to draw upon what she learned about her students reading performance from the Four Blocks reading conferences and the specific notations she made about student reading progress in the student reading logs. "I have seen how they are in class and know what I can expect from them." She used this knowledge to determine pairing and grouping of students. When pairing her students to work together, she based her decisions on her understanding of their reading ability.

> I look at the student's reading level and try to...put "like" students together. I don't want to put the highest student with the lowest student because they are so far apart. But I don't want to put the lowest student with another low student so I kind of pull from the middle for the really low students. The high students I end up pairing together. KC.5SW.05.12.08

The state assessment influenced Sue's assessment of her students' reading by way of the district-mandated use of the SRI. While Sue accommodated the mandate, she exerted her discretion over the use of the score and chose instead to rely on what she learned about her students' reading within the classroom context.

***State Assessment Influences on Writing Instruction.*** The state assessment of writing was the main factor that determined the content of writing instruction in Sue's classroom. The state assessment covered several different forms of writing. These forms were also included on the district's common assessment of writing and the district's 20-Day Plan for writing. The forms of writing were also covered on Kensington School's writing plan (Appendix P) which was put together as a result of the previously described SIP meeting in which the 2005 fall assessments were reviewed. Sue followed the district's 20-Day Plan and, when the Kensington writing plan was instituted, she followed that plan closely.

Sue taught the various forms of writing that were included on the school's writing plan. The plan called for cross-text analysis and personal narratives, both of which have been described in previous chapters, and peer reflection every week. The peer reflection writing called for students to critique someone else's writing. Sue described the difficulty her students had when trying to accomplish this.

> They have to grade another student's writing and give them strengths about their writing and weaknesses and what they could do instead. That is on the [state assessment]. That's really, really hard. KC.5SW.05.12.08

The specific difficulty Sue's students had with peer reflection writing was identifying an area of improvement other than spelling and grammar, "which is not what the state assessment scorers want to see" (KC.5SW.05.12.08).

Sue's writing instruction was, first, influenced by the district's 20-Day Plan, which was shaped by the state assessment of writing. Sue used the 20-day plan both to prepare her students prior to administering the state assessment, as well as to formulate lesson plans after the state assessment had concluded. Following the SIP meeting,

previously described, at which state assessment results were reviewed collectively by the faculty, Mary Locke created a school writing lesson plan that covered all the forms of writing students would encounter on the state assessment and that would that ensure that all of the weak points identified in the test results would get covered throughout the year (Appendix P). Sue adopted and followed the school writing plan in her classroom. As Sue noted in an interview, "Our biggest language arts focus is writing because that's where [Kensington] had struggled on the [state assessment]" (KC.5SW.05.12.08). Sue explained that there was a weakness in writing even in the previous year's fourth grade assessment results. Sue's mentor, Mary Locke, was the link from the state assessment to Sue's practice. Mary demonstrated teaching writing lessons, provided feedback to Sue on her teaching, and provided support for the instruction and evaluation of writing that would likely improve Sue's students' performance on the state tests.

One of the specific writing areas Sue worked on with her students was including details in writing. Sue pointed out that the reason she focused on this aspect of student writing was because of the state assessment test results.

> They didn't do a lot of [state assessment] specific writing last year. This year the biggest thing the kids lacked was details. And we saw that across the board in almost every kid, even our strong writers. [Reading from the previously mentioned report by Ms. Mathews (Appendix O)] There were 32 fifth graders who needed details and examples to adequately develop the ideas and content. So that's 32 out of 50. Basically 38 fourth graders and 33 third graders needed that same detail. So that's kind of been a 3rd, 4th, 5th grade thing this year." KC.5SW.06.05.10

Sue followed the writing plan and included lessons using the structure words. Structure words were being used school-wide because the state assessment tests from the fall showed that Kensington students lacked details in their writing. "We worked on using

those structure words because it is something the whole school is implementing so next year the fourth graders will know it when they come here" (KC.5SW.06.05.10). Sue posted the structure words on one of her bulletin boards so her students could refer to the list often. One lesson format used by Sue to teach her students to use the structure words followed the reading of a selection of text. Using the overhead to model for her students, Sue displayed the structure words and had her students supply as many descriptors about the story for each of the words that they could think of. After this brainstorming as a group, the students were given their writing assignment and asked to include many of the details the class had come up with into their writing assignment. Sue repeated this lesson format with several reading selections and encouraged her students to include details in their writing. After several lessons that included teacher modeling and support, Sue asked her students to include details in their writing without teacher modeling.

***Evaluating Writing.*** In addition to the types of writing students were asked to do in their assignments, the state assessment tests also defined the way Sue evaluated her students' writing.

> We got this whole packet of all the ways that they are graded on writing on the [state assessment]: personal narrative, writing in response to reading, across text, writing from knowledge and experience, reporting and reflecting. So there are all these different pieces that we are supposed to be using to grade their writing. KC.5SW.06.05.10

The scoring rubrics used by Kensington teachers to evaluate student writing were the same rubrics used to evaluate student writing on the state assessment. The district distributed these rubrics to the teachers. Kensington's principal and academic support coach fostered the use of the state assessment rubrics to evaluate Kensington students' writing. Mary Locke brought these rubrics with her when she demonstrated teaching

lessons in Sue's classroom, as well as others, and offered to help the teachers practice using the rubrics. The principal set up time for grade level teachers to get together to trade student work and evaluate the writing of students from other classes in order to assure that the teachers were using the rubrics and evaluating student work the same from classroom to classroom. Mary Locke noted the importance of this shared scoring time for the teachers at the previously described SIP meeting.

> It is critical that you are scoring these and it's even better to meet together and get someone else's opinion because we tend to say 'it was a bad day' or 'here's what he meant.' That is what those disinterested readers don't know. That is going to drive our writing scores. KC.rconML.06.05.30

In speaking about the use of the rubrics to assess writing Sue said, "This has been helpful for me." In addition to the use of the rubrics, the sharing of student work with other teachers and grading other students' work gave Sue confidence that she was assessing her students' writing consistently with those rubrics.

**State Assessment and Social Studies Instruction in Steve's Fifth Grade Class**

Unlike Sue's case, where the district and school mediated the state assessment's influence on her instruction and assessment of student learning, Steve's instruction was shaped more directly by the state assessment, without any mediating levels of mandates. There were no mandates or supports for the instruction of social studies, either by the district or the school. Rather, Steve relied on knowledge he had gained over the years about the content of the state test to determine the content of his social studies lessons. Though social studies was not considered a priority subject either in the school or the district, the state assessment did influence Steve's instruction in social studies. Rather

than being mediated by district or school policies, however, as it was in Sue's case, the test shaped Steve's instruction through his own knowledge of what content was tested.

Steve was strongly influenced by the state social studies assessment test in deciding which topics of the social studies curriculum he would include in his day-to-day social studies instruction. Steve made his decisions about which content should be emphasized or which could be skipped in the textbook based on his knowledge of the state assessment. In addition to the material found in the district-adopted textbook, he added material to fortify topics he expected would be on the state assessment. The *way* Steve taught social studies, however, was not influenced by the state assessment. It was largely shaped by his teaching philosophy, as described previously. He added projects, which included both visual interest and hands-on opportunities for his students to support these topics.

> I have seen enough questions over the years on the [state assessment] test about the Iroquois League, about a fellow named Deganawida, and some other things about how the plains Indians lived, and teepee building...I put a lot more in like the teepee project that we are doing right now. That's something that the kids can put their hands on and then they really remember more. All of those things I can tell you I have seen on the [state assessment test]. KC.5SA.05.09.28

The major projects he added included the teepee project, the talisman project, and the economics unit, which have each been described in chapter four. For these projects as well as his day-to day instruction, Steve relied on what he knew about the state assessment tests.

> How is it that we can enjoy tropical fruits in the winter that have been shipped up from Florida? A lot of kids only know that the stuff comes from the grocery store but they don't think beyond that. How things are shipped and the importance of railway lines and airports and trucking lines and how goods and services get moved back and forth. These are things that I've seen over and over again on the [state] test and so I know that

> those things are important for us to focus on with the kids. KC.5SA.05.09.28

> I know the state thinks these are important concepts because they keep repeating them. We didn't used to talk that much about the economics of where people settle and how goods and services move back and forth but it's much more important to talk about now than it used to be in social studies because of the [state] test. KC.5SA.05.09.28

While he did not experience pressure from his principal concerning student performance on the state social studies test, Steve did feel some pressure about the tests, especially as he expressed with the notion of policing or surveillance of teachers' work.

> It's one thing for it to be written in the state standards and then its another thing for it to be tested through the [state assessment test] so that people go 'Oh they're really watching what's being taught through these state standards.' It's definitely the police officer of state standards. KC.5SA.05.09.28

In addition to surveillance on the part of the state, through some informal comments made after the conclusion of an interview, Steve expressed his belief that the district was watching his work as a social studies teacher.

> Our superintendent is a force behind the district's emphasis on the [state assessment]. I know after the 6th graders take the test next fall, if [my students] don't perform well, they will come back to us and say "Why wasn't this taught?" and "This should have been taught better." KC.5SA.06.02.08

Interestingly, Steve believed that both the state and the district would scrutinize the social studies assessment results, even though in Kensington School the principal's attention was focused on reading, writing and math, which fall under NCLB requirements.

While using the textbook to cover the social studies curriculum along with the knowledge he had about the content of the state assessment addressed *what* he should teach, it didn't address the way he should teach it. He believed that relying solely on a

textbook was not the most effective way to teach social studies. Steve believed that substantive, active learning projects helped his students both understand and retain knowledge and that such projects allowed students to gain deeper understanding than was possible from reading a textbook. Because of this belief, Steve used his own discretion by including projects that supported the curriculum while, at the same time, he was cognizant of the content that was on the state assessment of social studies.

### *Discussion*

In response to the pressure schools are under to meet AYP mandates, what we see in this context, as has been shown by Spillane (1996), is a proliferation of district- and school-level mandates and tools that became both resources and constraints on teachers. This raises the question of whether these mandates are productive for teachers' work. We don't really know. In one way, it brought many resources to classrooms. In another way, the mandates overlapped or co-existed as was pointed out by a Kensington fourth grade teacher who found it all quite confusing. Lack of coordination of district and school efforts can create overlapping and even competing policies (Wong, Buice & Cole, 2006). In the case of Kensington, the district and the principal produced multiple mandates that addressed the same problem. The district required the SRI be administered to students, which ostensibly would determine students' reading levels and could be used to group students for instruction. The principal mandated the use of Four Blocks, which also provided various means of grouping students for reading instruction. On top of that, the principal acquired the services of Lindamood-Bell in order to provide teachers with standardized test scores that were to be used to group students for instruction. It is unclear

whether these really worked together, or at odds, or simply co-existed. In addition, Ms. Mathews acquired the services of Lindamood-Bell that was to provide support to students who were reading below grade level. The district's Fast ForWord program was aimed at these same students. Ms. Mathews did not offer an explanation or discuss the reason she felt it necessary to add Lindamood-Bell on top of the district's reading support plan. Did she feel that the district's Fast ForWord program was inadequate? When Ms. Mathews talked about the ways she was attempting to continue to meet AYP, she didn't mention the district, even though she did support the use of the Scholastic reading series and the SRI in her building.

Despite the many mandates teachers faced, they were still able to exert some discretion over how they would accommodate the demands put upon them. In Steve's case, even though he taught a subject that was not on the district or principal's radar, he was mindful to cover the material that was expected to be on the state assessment for social studies. He exerted discretion over the way he covered the material. He moved away from relying on the textbook as the sole source of material and added his own projects that he believed would help his students learn and retain the subject matter knowledge. Ironically, in Steve's case, the state had a more direct effect on his instruction than on Sue's. Despite being left pretty much on his own to teach social studies, he covered the content that the state assessment required without the mediating influence of district- and school-level mandates and resources.

In Sue's case, despite being bombarded by mandates and resources with which she tried to comply, she was still able to exert some discretion over her use of the resources. Though she accommodated the mandate to administer the SRI and record it on

report cards, Sue chose not to use it to determine her students' reading levels. Rather, she preferred to draw upon the knowledge she gained about her students through use of the Four Blocks tools. She believed these tools, by allowing her to interact with her students, gave her a better understanding of her students' abilities. Sue made her own choices among these tools. The district produced the 20-day plan notebooks in order to help teachers prepare their students to take the state assessment. However, the school didn't really have 20 days of school prior to the testing. Sue was not able to cover all of the material the district had determined to be necessary for students to be familiar with before taking the test. She exerted some discretion in selecting the material to cover, and even after the test, whether to continue using the notebooks to shape her instruction.

It is also important to note the way people were central carriers or mediators of state and district policies. Mary Locke held a unique, quasi-district role at Kensington School. She influenced the use of Four Blocks as the preferred form of reading instruction through her own experience using it as a classroom teacher, as well as through her influential position as a longtime faculty member at Kensington. She worked both alongside the principal, as was evident at the SIP meeting, and alongside teachers, as was evident in her work with Sue and others. For Sue, this was especially important because of the personal and professional relationship that developed between her and Mary Locke. The principal, Ms. Mathews, played an important role in shaping the way state and district policy played out in her building. While supporting and enforcing district mandates, Ms. Mathews added her own mandates for reading and writing instruction. Her actions pushed the boundaries of her role as principal, expanding her authority into classrooms and over instruction. Principals traditionally have authority over school-wide

policies, while teachers maintain authority over their classroom domain. Ms. Mathews used the state assessment results to push teachers away from the deficit models some held of their students. The state test results framed the low expectations and deficit models held by some of the teachers. She confronted these misconceptions at the SIP meeting and provided teachers with tools and resources that would help all students succeed. The district extended its boundaries by creating the position of academic support coach for the Title I schools. The academic support coach extended the reach of the district into the school-wide decision-making arena. At Kensington School this was important because it put Mary Locke in a pivotal role as a carrier of policy into the school and classrooms.

This chapter has traced the path of state assessment policy into the classrooms of Kensington School. In the next chapter, I will look at the ways these teachers sought to assign grades to their students' work. Grading is one way that teachers represent their understanding of their students' learning in a visible way. Each of these teachers approached the task differently, and each carried personal beliefs about learning and grades that shaped the their practice.

## Chapter Six

## Assessment for Grading

Giving students grades, whether on individual assignments or cumulative report card grades, is one of the most visible assessment practices engaged in by teachers. While the official mandate for grades comes from the district and the school, the formulation of that grade is often left entirely up to the individual teacher. Though largely taken for granted, the issue of grading raises a number of dilemmas for teachers. First, there is an assumption that a grade is a valid representation of student learning in relation to the grade level of the student. However, it is largely left for the teacher to decide what the grade depicts in his or her classroom. Teachers must decide what assignments, or representations of student learning, will be included in the report card grade and what weight will be given to each of these representations. He or she must try to make student learning visible in a way that it can be measured and translated into a grade. In addition, teachers need a rational system for assigning grades because they may have to justify to others, first and foremost to parents, the grades they assign to students.

This chapter explores the difficulties the teachers in this study faced as they graded their students and how they sought to resolve these difficulties. The resources and strategies the two teachers drew upon to resolve them differed according to both the teachers' years of experience and the subject matter. Both teachers experienced challenges finding ways to quantify complex learning. For Sue, a new teacher, this challenge revolved particularly around reading and was further complicated by her efforts

to account for student effort as well as perceived ability. The ways in which Sue attempted to resolve this challenge led to further difficulties including conflicts with students' parents and lowering her expectations for student learning. For Steve grading had become efficient. He had instituted several routines, which allowed him to readily quantify student learning. At the same time, he continued to face challenges of maintaining student interest and ensuring retention of content knowledge.

For each of these teachers, the issue of grading brought different dilemmas to the surface. Further, the resolution of these dilemmas brought additional dilemmas to the surface.

## *Sue's Assessment Practices for Grading*

The central challenge Sue Williams experienced in grading was finding a way to measure student progress in reading, making it visible in ways that could be translated into a grade that she could justify. While Sue also taught writing and language arts to these fifth grade classes, the grading of these subjects posed less of an internal conflict for her than the grading of reading.

In the next section, I describe the observed lessons and assignments Sue included in her students' grades. These assessments helped Sue as she sought to resolve the problem of grading her students in reading, writing, and language arts.

### *Graded Assignments in Observations*

I observed Sue's classroom instruction on fourteen occasions. These observations ranged from one hour to two hours in length. Several of these lessons included more than

one graded assignment. The following table summarizes the eighteen graded assignments that were given during the lessons observed.

**Graded Assignments in Observations of Sue's Instruction**

| Obs # | 1 a | 1 b | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 a | 5 b | 6 a | 6 b | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 a | 10 b | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reading | | | ● | | ● | | | ● | | ● | | ● | ● | | ● | | ● | |
| Writing | | ● | | | | | | | ● | | | | | ● | | ● | | ● |
| ELA | D O L | | | ● | | P | ● | | | | P | | | | | | | |
| Formal | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Informal | | | ● | | ● | | | ● | | ● | | ● | | | ● | | ● | |
| Teacher checked | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Class checked | ● | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Writing Journal | | ● | | | | ● | | | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Four Blocks SSR Log | | | ● | | ● | | | ● | | ● | | ● | | | ● | | ● | |
| Test | | | | | | | | | | | | | ● | | | | | |
| State/ District Rubric | | ● | | | | | | | ● | | | | | ● | | ● | | ● |
| Teacher's Rubric | | | | | | ● | | | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Percentage | ● | | | ● | | | ● | | | | | | ● | | | | | |

**Table 10**

DOL=Daily Oral Language; P=Poetry

The first row in table 10 indicates the observation number. When a single observation produced more than one graded assignment, they were separated out as "a" and "b" assignments. Table 10 also indicates whether the lesson was part of the reading, writing, or language arts grade. I have further labeled a Daily Oral Language lesson and two lessons from Sue's poetry unit (These were more fully explained in chapter four). I have also noted whether the assessment was formal or informal. I use the term *formal assessment* to indicate an assignment that produced a written document, such as a test, quiz, or paper. This document created a record of student performance that the teacher

could evaluate and translate into a numerical score or grade as part of the report card grading process. I use the term *informal assessment* to indicate that the teacher assesses student progress in a more casual manner, such as observation of students, inventories, participation in class discussions, and social interactions. While the teacher may make note of some of these observances, they are usually kept "in their head" as overall impressions of how their students are doing, either individually or collectively.

Eight of the classroom observations included graded assignments for reading, five of the assessments were for writing, and five of the assessments were for language arts. Seven of the reading lessons observed included SSR reading conferences. The only exception was the administration of the district common assessment for writing. The assessments for the SSR conferences have been labeled both formal and informal, which may at first, seem counterintuitive. However, Sue kept detailed notes in the SSR Log (see Appendix M), which provided a formal record of her assessment of the student's reading performance on specific indicators. In addition to these formal records of performance, Sue indicated through interviews that she had informally drawn upon these conferences to inform her instruction (this will be discussed in chapter seven). For this reason, these conferences were labeled as both formal and informal forms of assessment. The table also indicates whether the assessments were teacher checked or checked by students as part of a whole class activity. While I only saw one assignment corrected together as a class (the DOL), Sue indicated in interviews that the end-of-story questions were often corrected together as a class, rather than teacher checked. The next three rows indicate the document or record of student work the teacher used to assess student learning (writing journal, SSR Log, test). The last two rows indicate the instrument the teacher used to

evaluate student work, such as the state/district rubric for writing, a rubric developed by the teacher, or by the percentage of correct answers.

***Making Reading "Visible" and Accounting for Effort***

As a young teacher, Sue did not have a lot of experience giving report card grades. Report card grades present a greater challenge for teachers than daily grades because these are "public" records that are scrutinized, not only by students, but also by parents and the school administrator. While the district report card enumerated the subjects and the specific standards to be measured and graded, the decision about which student assignments would be included and how each would be weighted in the grade was largely left up to each teacher to determine. Sue was responsible for grading both fifth grade classes in reading, writing, and language arts. The district report card organized and grouped subjects; in addition, standards were included for each subject area. The students' Lexile score was to be recorded each marking period. The Kensington report card required Sue to determine a percentage and letter grade for reading and the combined subjects of English and writing into one grade. In addition, she needed to score each of the standards using a rubric score of 1 - 4. Appendix Q shows the portions of Kensington School's fifth grade report card that are relevant to this study.

The district report card provided a partial resolution to Sue's quandary about how she would go about determining grades. Sue used the report card format to determine how she would sift through student work to determine grades. "There's a lot of stuff, so I just kind of stuck to what the report card was asking for" (KC.5SW.05.11.21). The report card separated the subject of reading from the subjects of English/writing and enumerated the standards that were to be graded. Despite this, Sue still had to evaluate the various

forms of data she had available for each subject and determine how she would come up with these grades.

***The problem of grading reading.*** Sue expressed the inner conflict that grading posed for her on several occasions, especially in the area of reading. Even before the first marking period ended, she was beginning to contemplate the difficulty of the task. "Now it's hard to pull a grade from that [reading] conference...I haven't really thought about that yet because I haven't had to do that report card grade yet" (KC.5SW.05.10.18). Her uncertainty continued even into the second marking period as she struggled with her own beliefs about grades.

> Reading I feel is one of the hardest things to grade because its not that they know how to read or they don't. If they are having a hard time understanding I don't feel that they should get a bad grade because we are working on doing it together. So I do struggle a lot with putting that grade on the report card (KC. 05.12.08).

One option Sue could have used, but rejected, would have been to use the student's reading level as the determiner for the grade. "Reading is hard to assess how they're doing besides just saying, OK, they're at this level" (KC.5SW.05.12.08). The district mandated that students' reading level be recorded on report cards; each marking period students were tested with the computer-based Scholastic Reading Inventory. This district-mandated test reported student reading level as a Lexile score. Each grade level is equated to a range of Lexile scores.

> It's on [the report card] because we have done one reading inventory and we are doing another one right before report cards. Usually they don't do it at the beginning of the year, but this year the principal thought we should do it so we can see how they have grown. So we have a base line from the beginning of the year. They take it at the end of the year, but then they have a whole summer where they lose a lot...so we do it every quarter before the report cards (KC.5SW.05.10.18).

While the Lexile equivalent of the SRI score was recorded on the report card, Sue rejected using the Lexile score as the sole basis for determining the report card grade for reading for several reasons. First, she didn't really trust the test, as noted in chapter five.

> I don't feel like it's the most accurate... I had a student that tested very, very low--below grade level and she is a very high reader. We retested her and she was high" KC.05.12.08).

In addition, she expressed concern that using the SRI score to determine the reading grade would be too harsh an assessment for students who read below grade level, but who put in extra work on their reading because of the out-of-class support they were getting.

> Technically, based on their reading level they are at a second or third grade level, but giving them a failing grade is not what I want to do...I think it would be detrimental to them and their parents to see a low grade even though they are working so hard at it (KC.5SW.06.01.31).

For Sue, it was necessary to come to an understanding of her students as learners in order for her to assign a letter grade to their reading. She rejected the readily available SRI as a metric that could be translated into a rationalized grade. Rather, she sought to find ways to make her students' learning visible through means that she could rationalize to herself and others. Sue utilized a variety of data resources available to her to assess her students' learning and turn that information into grades that fit the institutional requirements imposed by the district as well as her own personal beliefs about grades.

In sum, while Sue had various technical measures available that could be translated into report card grades, she weighed their value against what she knew about her students as learners of reading. She did not entirely trust these instruments as a reliable measure of her students' progress. Sue came to depend on her own interpretation of her students' development as readers, utilizing tools available to her through the

district's reading program, but relying on her observation of them over time in the classroom.

One resource that was instrumental in Sue's grading formula for reading was the Four Blocks Literacy Model. Several components of Four Blocks were central in Sue's assessment of her students' learning. One such resource was the Self-Selected Reading Log on which Sue noted student progress on several indicators including fluency, use of reading strategies, comprehension, and appropriate reading level of text (See appendix M). In addition to the prescribed notations, Sue also kept many specific notes on individual student's reading and comprehension as she heard them read and assessed the answers to her questions.

Sue described the SSR reading log and how she kept detailed notes that could help her assess her students' learning.

> It doesn't have any questions on it. It has what I'm looking for while I'm listening to them read. Then for comprehension it just has what their comprehension is, but I usually write myself notes. What kind of questions I asked, what their answer was...I ha[ve] to try to be very explicit with the note...I tell the kids 'tell your friend to come next but wait a couple minutes' before they come so I can get this down before I go to the next kid. (KC.5SW.05.12.08)

When asked after the first marking period how she had graded reading, she mentioned the SSR reading log, specifically in relation to grading her students on the reading standards.

> I used a lot of our self-selected reading and we do student conferences, so we took a lot from that. I asked a lot of comprehension questions, and I keep notes so I can see where the kids are. We also made sure they are reading at their level because we talk to them a lot about that. In choosing books they use the five-finger rule. Then we just have a lot of discussion in those conferences (KC.5SW.05.11.21).

> Then depending on...where their skills were when I spoke with them, we have our standards that we grade 4,3,2,1, and that's more where I chose that instead of taking it from their actual grade. Just seeing if they met those reading standards (KC.5SW.05.11.21).

The SSR reading log was an important tool Sue used to assess her students' progress in reading, to determine what areas of focus would be most helpful to her students, as well as an integral part of her reading grades.

> It's a lot in my head figuring out what they are learning and where they are at and then pulling...I'll look back to at this during reading and say 'where were they struggling' so I can write a comment on the report card and know what to work on for the next marking period. (KC.5SW.05.12.08)

While Sue did rely on the SSR reading log as a tool, she added her own detailed notes and observations of her students' reading performance during the reading conferences. In addition to relying on those notes for her interpretation of their reading progress, she also used them to justify her grading decisions.

Another resource that was available to Sue in the guided reading portion of the Four Blocks model was the district-adopted textbook and the end-of-story questions included as part of that text. Sue confirmed that she used this as a resource for her reading grade. "We have a basal series and we read from that. We do comprehension questions from that. We write paragraphs and I pull a lot from that" (KC.5SW.05.11.21). This provided Sue with a relatively objective means of grading based on the number correct and the number wrong for each set of questions. In fact, at the end of the first marking period, Sue named this as the main source she drew on to formulate the percentage and letter grade on the report card.

> Most of the grade came from actually grading comprehension questions through the basal series...and some other things that we did in class, just some stories that we...had to read and answer some questions. I mostly

> just graded those questions and then had an average grade. (KC.5SW.05.11.21)

While Sue used these questions as a means to obtain a percentage that could be converted to a letter grade, her concern remained focused on student learning.

> Most of the actual report card grade is based on those comprehension questions and a lot of them check together and will change some things so that they understand. So they are not necessarily getting them all wrong if they didn't understand when we go to that grade because I feel we have to talk about it. I'm not just going to say 'here's your question, OK, go on to the next story'. (KC.5SW.05.12.08)

Hence, Sue used the reading text comprehension questions not only as a means of obtaining a numerical score that could be used for grading, but also as a means of analyzing her students' reading comprehension in a way that informed her grading decisions. She did not use these questions merely as a technical measure that was translated into a grade, rather she used them for further discussion that helped her come to understand her students as readers.

In addition to the components of the Four Blocks Literacy Model just described, Sue obtained other resources that she incorporated into the assessment of her students. Sue found instructional materials in her classroom that had been left by the previous teacher. Among these materials were classroom sets of novels along with lesson plans and a literature unit book containing tests for the novels. Sue drew on the help of her mentor to use these materials in a way that fit the Four Blocks model. After reading one of the novels, Sue gave her class a test from the literature unit book. This test was graded by a percentage and became part of the marking period grade.

In order to solve the problem of grading her students in reading, Sue utilized many resources available to her in the classroom. She rejected using merely technical

means that didn't provide her with what she felt was an understanding of her students as readers. Rather, she used these resources as tools to help her come to that understanding. She used her own observation of her students' reading performance as well as the information these tools provided. She brought all this information together to come up with a grade that she could justify. At the end of the process, she could feel confident that the letter grade she put on each student's report card represented her understanding of his or her progress as a reader.

***The problem of grading English/writing.*** While the grading of her students in reading was the central challenge Sue faced, she was also responsible for grading her students in English (commonly called language arts in the elementary curriculum) and writing. Even though these subjects posed less of an inner conflict for her, Sue still had to come up with a plan for turning student learning in these subjects into grades. The district report card required a percentage and letter grade for English/writing, with rubric scores of 1- 4 on five standards (Appendix Q). There was no clear delineation on the report card between English (or language arts) and writing, so the determination of how these two areas were combined into one grade was left up to the teacher.

Sue acknowledged her struggle with grading writing. "Writing is hard. It's very hard to grade" (KC.5SW.06.05.10). Part of the difficulty in grading writing is that it is such a time consuming task. Writing assignments are not as easily corrected as are assignments on which there are clear right or wrong answers that can be counted up and translated into a percentage. In addition to the amount of time involved in evaluating writing, the volume of writing assignments required by the fifth grade curriculum made it hard for Sue to keep up.

> I have a pile the kids have been asking about. I said, 'I'll get it back to you' because I had something from last week that I just didn't get a chance to get to and then we did this [district writing] prompt. And I'm like, 'I have to grade your prompt first. Sorry. You'll get it back, I promise.' I have 50 of them to grade. (KC.5SW.06.05.10)

One resource that eased Sue's problem about grading student writing was the state assessment rubric for writing. The district and Kensington School utilized the state's writing rubrics for all students' writing. In this way, the teachers used the same rubric to assess writing whether it was a classroom writing assignment or an assignment intended to prepare students for the state assessment of writing. This meant that Sue didn't have to construct her own system for the review and grading of her students' writing.

An additional resource that eased Sue's problem was that the school district gave inservice training to all teachers in the district in the use of the rubrics. At Kensington School, the teachers got together with samples of student writing. These samples of writing were assessed by several teachers and traded in order to assure that a common standard was being applied to all students' writing.

> This has been helpful for me and we kind of came up with, as a school, that we would grade one piece of writing a week even though we are doing two or three or four. And that personal narrative is three days [a week]. This week we just did one. Next week we'll be doing two. It just depends on what it is. So we decided that we will grade cross text and next we'll grade a personal narrative. So there is one graded piece per week. (KC.5SW.06.05.10)

In sum, the practice of collectively working on student writing lessened the tension Sue experienced concerning grading writing. In addition, the school-wide decision to grade one formal piece of writing a week, rather than every assignment, eased the volume of work for Sue. Sue found the assessment of writing to be very time consuming and she struggled to be able to give her students timely feedback on their work. The school plan

assured that students would get ongoing, weekly feedback about their writing and at the same time it made the process of grading student work less overwhelming for Sue.

The other portion of the English/writing grade includes the portion of the curriculum that is commonly called language arts in elementary schools. For this portion of the grade teachers could use the standards to delineate the specifics that were to be included. The standards, in addition to the writing process, included grammar, a variety of types of writing, and oral presentations. Sue was left to determine for herself what would be included in the grade and how she would weight different assignments. Sue utilized both formal and informal forms of assessment that she then compiled into a report card grade.

Sue had several resources available to her for both the percentage and letter grade portion that the report card called English/writing. First, she utilized the DOL worksheets she found in her room as well as other worksheets that Sue presented as mini-lessons on grammar and punctuation. These worksheets were collected and assigned a number score which was used as part of the percentage portion of the grade.

Another source for the percentage portion of the grade was Sue's poetry unit. The poetry unit met the standard requirement of having students use a variety of forms of writing. Sue constructed her own rubric for the grading of her students' work on the unit. This provided a formal assessment of student work on the unit.

> The whole process was...they were learning the form for each type of those poems. As we did their final copies, which we typed in the computer lab, we double checked to make sure that they were really matching the syllables, and they had commas, and the poetry kind of stuff...When they turned in their final poetry book, that's what I graded. I had a rubric and each poem was worth 15 points. I kind of just broke that down into, did they follow the form that we set out as a class? Then I put in a couple points for spelling and punctuation, just because that was their final-final

> [copy]. We had written it three or four times. Then they also had points for creativity because they did illustrations for every page...we did a little oral presentation too and they got a few points for that also...it was a total of 100 points. (KC.5SW.06.05.16)

In addition to the formal assessment of the students' work, the poetry unit also provided an informal assessment opportunity for the five standards for English/writing portion of the report card. Sue created a way for students to share their written work through oral presentation, another required standard, as well as listen to the work of others.

> We not only [wrote] poetry, but we had a final 'coffee shop' atmosphere in here where we shoved all the desks out of the way. We had lamps that we borrowed from all the teachers in the building. We did hot chocolate and cookies and the kids got up on a stool and read one of their poems...Basically, they had to choose at least one of their poems that they had written themselves. Most of them read three or four. They read poems they found in books, so they really got into it. That was kind of another way we used for assessment too, just to see if they were understanding the different kinds of poems...they gave a little feedback after other people read...We decided on the book just because they put so much work into all of these poems. I didn't want to just see them in their journal. Then we tied it in with the computer lab because they have to learn word processing anyway. (KC.5SW.06.05.16)

In order to solve the problem of grading student writing as well as English skills, Sue came up with a variety of resources to accomplish this task. She used classroom resources of DOL and grammar worksheets. In addition, she formulated a poetry unit that helped her account for the standards on the report card. The poetry unit required students to write in a variety of formats as well as give an oral presentation. For this portion of the report card, there were few aids provided by either the district or the school. Sue relied on her own interpretation of the report card requirements to come up with a solution to the challenge of grading.

***Accounting for effort.*** Sue's struggle to resolve the dilemma of grading her students raised another dilemma because she believed that student effort needed to be taken into account in their grades. Sue used various forms of formal and informal assessment to get a picture of what her students were learning. She sought ways to state this learning in the form of a grade, but this didn't completely resolve the grading issue for her. Drawing upon her close work with her students, Sue had a sense of what they were capable of accomplishing in reading. She wanted to reward the work ethic of students who were putting forth effort that she felt was above their ability. She also wanted to reprimand students who weren't working up to their ability by incorporating the factor of effort into their grades.

One way this manifested in her grading practice was figuring out what to do about students who were getting reading support through Fast ForWord. These students were doing extra work in reading, both at school and at home. Sue struggled trying to balance between their actual reading level and the amount of work they were putting into reading. Sue approached it by "figuring out what percentage would be for each level and then [writing] a lot of comments on those kids' report cards too" (KC.5SW.05.12.08). When asked if this boosted the students' grades, she confirmed that it did. "Yes, a little bit just because I know how much they're working (KC.5SW.05.12.08).

At the other end of the spectrum, Sue's incorporation of effort into the grade resulted in some student grades being lowered. In one case, Sue gave a student a B- for reading on her report card. Sue justified this grade saying she didn't think the student was putting much effort into the post-story comprehension questions. These were often corrected as a whole class, giving students an opportunity to change their answers.

> I don't think she was taking her time and concentrating and answering those comprehension questions that we actually wrote out. I know that she is a stronger reader than that but I felt she earned that B- even though I know she is a stronger reader. (KC.5SW.05.11.21)

This was not the only case of a student's grade being lowered because of lack of effort on the student's part.

> There were a few other kids like that too. The same kind of thing this marking period we saw a lot. Not so much for science and social studies, they do a lot of projects, but with the math and language arts. Just not putting all their effort into it and getting a lot lower grade than they actually deserved. (KC.5SW.05.11.21)

Sue had a strongly held belief that grades should reflect the effort put forth by students. Effort is neither visible nor measurable, but Sue included her interpretation of the effort her students had put into their work as part of their grade. Sue drew upon her observations of her students and her knowledge about what they were able to do in particular subject areas to determine the amount of effort they were capable of putting into their work. This completely subjective aspect of her grading process led to further dilemmas for Sue.

***Dealing with parents***. Sue's efforts to resolve her inner conflict about grades by factoring in effort as part of student grades resulted in another challenge—problems with parents. Sue found that it was difficult explaining to parents how she came up with grades, even though she had a clear rationale that she had worked out for to her own satisfaction.

> Parents don't understand how you get the grade…It's hard to explain even after you come up with it. Even if you say, 'OK, they met a four' and you read it. They are like, 'what does that mean?' I said a four was 85% but they got an 83. (KC.5SW.06.05.10)

The parents of Sue's student who received a B- in reading objected to their child's grade. They were "upset" at the conference because their daughter had not gotten an A. The parents asked Sue to reconsider the grade because the student had previously been an all-A student. Sue was confident in the grade she had come up with and declined to change it. "So that was a choice that I stuck with because she earned that grade. I told them she is a strong reader but she's not putting that effort into it" (KC.5SW.05.11.21). Though the parents ultimately accepted Sue's decision, Sue was disconcerted about the parents' complaint. Sue consulted her mentor concerning this grading issue.

> At report card time I had a parent that was angry with me because their child got a B instead of an A, you know. And it really was a B instead of an A. She wrote me this very not nice letter and I kind of went to Mary Locke [Sue's mentor] and went, "What do I do?" (KC.5SW.06.05.16)

Sue's mentor, Mary Locke, gave her moral support and boosted her confidence concerning her grading rationale. Sue and Mary discussed the grading issue and Mary concluded that there was no reason why Sue should change the student's grade.

Sue described interactions with other parents during those conferences, where the parents were surprised by their child's grade, but some parents had been more accepting of it.

> But I think the parents kind of said this is their wake up call and they have to be more responsible and they're in fifth grade now. I think a lot more is coming at them than they were prepared for. (KC.5SW.05.11.21)

Report card grades resulted in another kind of problem with a parent. There was a glaring dissimilarity between one student's performance on the state assessment and his performance in the classroom. While the student had performed quite well on the state tests, his grades were poor due to incomplete and missing assignments. At spring

conferences, Sue tried to explain this discrepancy to the parent who wasn't accepting of a critical assessment of her child. The parent felt that because her child had the ability to do the work, he should be graded accordingly. Steve Adams, the other fifth grade teacher, who had the same experience with the student, supported Sue in this issue. Both teachers made the same point at their individual conference with the parent, confirming that they were sure the student could do the work, but his refusal caused him to get failing grades.

***Effort raised another problem: compromise of learning.*** In another instance, Sue's attempt to reward effort and keep her students involved in a difficult lesson ultimately caused her to compromise the content of the lesson. On one hand, she needed to encourage student effort to master the content while, on the other hand, maintain their interest in the lesson. In order to do accomplish this, in one lesson, she eliminated vital criteria for writing a Haiku when she feared that they wouldn't try if they felt the work was too hard.

During her poetry unit, Sue introduced her lesson on haiku poetry by reading Haiku Hike[38]. On the overhead, Sue wrote the required number of syllables for each line of a haiku. She also displayed several examples of haiku poems and had the class count the number of syllables in each line. She then distributed poster paper to each of the five groups of desks on which she had written topics (bird, spring, ground, night, sky). Each group wrote ideas about the topic on their poster. Each group of students then rotated to another poster and continued in the same manner until all students had put ideas on each of the five topic posters. Sue collected the posters and put them on the board in the front of the room. The teacher and the whole class then wrote haiku poems together using the

[38] Haiku Hike (2005). by Fourth Grade Students of St. Mary's Catholic School of Mansfield, Massachusetts. Scholastic, Inc. New York.

ideas on the posters. Sue then had students write a haiku individually, but told them that the number of syllables didn't have to be exact if they had trouble making it work out. At that point, the building principal came into the classroom to do an observation of the teacher. Students took turns reading their haiku poems to the whole class. When a student read a haiku that didn't have the correct number of syllables, the principal interrupted, saying that the student had better count again. One of the students sitting near the principal said, "She told us we didn't have to be exact." Sue asked the students to read and count the syllables of the haiku of the person sitting next to them in order to help them check their work. While students read and counted, the principal said to the teacher that she couldn't help but count. Sue said, "That's OK. I wasn't counting. I was so excited that they were writing."

When she was later asked how she assessed the Haiku lesson, she described her idea of poetic license.

> We tried to teach that form, but it's hard to have a 5-7-5 for Haiku, you know. We kind of tried to teach them that poets have creativity and they can kind of veer away from the form a little bit as long as they are still kind of sticking to that idea. So I think just showing them that kind of thing and that it's the poem in itself in the end not the form to begin with. (KC.5SW.06.05.16)

In this response, Sue reveals that she believed that the Haiku assignment was hard for her students. In order to keep them involved in the lesson, to keep trying and not give up, she transformed the focus of the lesson from the form of the Haiku to the effort of her students, even if that effort didn't meet the requirements of the form of the Haiku. Thus, Sue struggled between the value of the lesson and the value of keeping her students involved with the lesson. Ultimately, this move lowered the learning expectations Sue had for her students.

Sue drew upon a number of resources in her effort to solve the problem of grading for reading, English and writing, but she never fully solved it. The issue of effort continued to be a complicating factor for her grading practices in several ways. While she rewarded students for effort or penalized them for the lack of it, this raised the dilemma of problems with parents. Further, in order to maintain students' effort in class work, she eliminated some of the criteria for Haiku, thereby compromising her learning goals.

### Steve's Assessment Practices for Grading

Steve's experience with grading raised different problems than those experienced by Sue. While Sue's struggle was near the surface in her thinking because she was resolving the dilemma as a new experience, Steve felt that he had solved the dilemma a long time ago. The central challenge of Steve's grading practice was finding a way to measure the kind of student learning that Steve considered important and translating that learning into a grade. On one level, he didn't seem to be concerned about producing student grades because he had developed efficient means of doing so. At the same time, he constantly looked for opportunities to construct learning activities that would make learning "come alive" for his students. In doing so, he constructed activities that involved students in hands-on projects. These activities were assessed using rubrics Steve had developed, but the actual learning resulting from the projects was not so easily assessed and translated into a grade. I will draw upon observational data as well as interviews to support these claims.

In the next section, I describe the observed lessons and assignments Steve included in his students' social studies grades. These assessments helped Steve as he sought to resolve the problem of grading his students in social studies.

## Graded Assignments in Observations

I observed Steve's classroom instruction of social studies lessons on eleven occasions. These observations ranged from one hour to nearly a full school day in length. Several of these lessons included more than one graded assignment. Table 11 summarizes the fifteen graded assignments that were given during the lessons observed.

**Graded Assignments in Observations of Steve's Instruction**

| Obs # | 1 | 2a | 2b | 3a | 3b | 4 | 5a | 5b | 6a | 6b | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Resource | T | T<br>F<br>K | T | DG | PKT | T | DG | T<br>F<br>K | T | T<br>F<br>K | EC | EC | EC | EC | EC |
| Formal | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Informal | | | | | | | | | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Teacher checked | ● | | ● | | ● | ● | | | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Class checked | | ● | | ● | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Daily Grade | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Test | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Project | | | | | ● | | | | | | | | | | |
| Rubric | | | | | ● | | | | | | | | | | |

Resources: T=Textbook; TFK=Time For Kids; DG=Daily Geography; PKT=Geography Packet; PJT=Project; EC=Economics Unit **Table 11**

The first row of table 11 indicates the observation number. When a single observation produced more than one graded assignment, they were separated out as "a" and "b" assignments. Steve used various resources for the graded assignments in these lessons that were described more fully in chapter four. He gave assignments from the textbook; these were usually written answers to questions at the end of sections of text. He used the Time For Kids publication. This included questions and worksheets that went along with the articles read by the class. He used Daily Geography worksheets. He also used a packet of geography worksheets on the continent of South America. In addition, he taught his economics unit, which included many assignments that comprised part of the social studies grade.

This chart also indicates whether the assessment was formal or informal. It also denotes whether the teacher checked the assignment or whether students graded it as part of a whole class routine. In addition, the chart makes note of the relative "weight" of the assignment. As will be explained later, Steve gives increasing weight to daily assignments, projects, and tests. The last row indicates when the assignment is graded using a rubric Steve has developed for grading projects and assignments he has designed himself.

***Steve's Problem of Grading.*** As a teacher with sixteen years of experience, Steve had been through the grading process many times. He did not express the uncertainty that his colleague, Sue, struggled with to come up with grades. Over the years he had developed routines and procedures that efficiently met the institutional mandate for report card grades. On the surface, it didn't appear that Steve experienced a problem with grading; he believed that he had resolved it over the years. However, through

observations and interviews it became apparent that his procedures did lead him to experience conflicts between efficiency and learning. In some instances, classroom procedures caused him to accept some compromises to student learning. In addition, he revealed a belief that substantive learning was embedded in learning activities that gave students hands-on experience. The challenge became a matter of translating "real" learning into a metric that represented that learning.

***Steve's Resolution of the Grading Problem.*** Steve was confident in the procedure he had developed to come up with report card grades. When asked shortly after the first marking period what he had taken into consideration for the social studies grade, he described the process of setting up his computerized grading program. He invested a considerable amount of time setting it up with different categories: tests, quizzes, projects, daily assignments, notes and journals. He assigned point values to weight the assignments differently. Daily grades were worth the fewest points, projects were worth more and tests were worth the most. Assignments were given a point value that could conveniently be converted to a percentage.

> The way that I usually grade these [daily assignments] is I look at what kind of questions there are, try to figure out something I could do, either on a 10 point scale or a 25 point scale and that way I can get something that will calculate out roughly so they can get 100% somehow. (KC.5SA.05.11.21)

While the end result was a quick conversion of points into a grade, Steve had invested a lot of time over the years developing a fair and consistent way to convert student work into report card grades. In addition to deciding *what* would be counted as part of the grade, he also had to decide which assignments had more value in the creation of the grade.

> This is the hierarchy of the assignments as I do it throughout the year. Tests are highest, large projects (reports), lesser projects (like talisman, continent packet), under that would be quizzes, then daily assignments. (KC.5SA.05.11.21)

> Quizzes are weighed a lot less heavily than a test. These daily worksheets are less than a quiz. If we get two or three tests in a marking period, those are about 40% of the grade. Quizzes are worth 15-20% of the grade, daily assignments about 10%. Because they are all weighted that way, when they are put into the computer program will just keep averaging everything so that it can spit out at the end of the marking period a percentage for the overall work they did. (KC.5SA.05.11.21)

Through his experience over the years, Steve's system had developed in a manner that accounted for different types of assignments, different weighted assignments, and recently, it included a computer program to aid in the tracking and translation of scores into grades.

His grading system accommodated the variation from marking period to marking period depending on how many tests, quizzes, and projects fell within the marking period. He adjusted the timing of the projects and geography packets to coincide with topics being covered in the textbook.

> Tests are 40%, large projects about 25-35%, small projects are 20-30%, quizzes are about 15-20%, and daily assignments are 10%. That's how I usually weight them. These move back and forth depending on how many we give. I usually will have two unit tests in the marking period, sometimes I have two or three projects depending on what theme we are working with. (KC.5SAQ.05.11.21)

Steve maintained flexibility in his system as he constantly made adjustments to the content being covered, the pace at which it was being covered, and the daily contingencies of classroom life.

When asked if he had experienced a quandary deciding what grade to give a student, he responded that he had not. He credited his grading system for alleviating problems with grading. His record keeping system allowed him to alert his students to missing assignments in time for them to get them done. "They knew ahead of time that the grade was either going to go up or down based on whether those assignments were turned in. It was pretty cut and dried based on the assignments they turned in" (KC.5SA.05.11.21).

Another grading issue that Steve had resolved over the years was clarifying student grades for parents. Steve developed rubrics that were used to grade his project assignments. One of the reasons he cited for using these rubrics was that it clarified his expectations for both students and parents. In the past, "some of the students and parents would come back and say, 'what did you base that grade on?' As a result, he developed rubrics. He reasoned that using rubrics for all assignments made expectations clear from the beginning.

> In some cases, with some of the activities, I've had the parents sign off on them when the assignment is given so that I know they have seen the instructions. And that way there is no question about point value assigned to different things and what I'm looking for so they know when the grade comes back they can see where it came from" (KC.5SA.05.11.21).

The use of rubrics allowed Steve to anticipate and alleviate misunderstandings before they happened. Drawing on his experience over the years, he had developed rubrics that clarified both his expectations for assignments as well as the resulting grades not only for students but also for parents.

Steve's classroom routines and procedures facilitated his assessment of student work and the paperwork it generated. He instituted routines to ease the distribution of

materials, handing in work, grading work, returning that work to students, and sending paperwork home. One very important routine had to do with the record keeping duty of teaching. Each student was assigned a student number that correlated to the alphabetic order of his or her last name. In this way, Steve could quickly put papers in alphabetic order by putting them in numeric order before recording scores in his grade book.

Another important routine in Steve's classroom was the correction of work as a whole class. This routine holds a legitimate value and benefit for both the teacher and the students, allowing the teacher to identify misunderstandings and clarify material to the whole class at the same time. In Steve's class, whole-class correction also served as a record-keeping routine intended to efficiently correct student work without wasting class time.

**Tensions Between Efficient Procedures and Assessment of Learning**

Taken at face value, it would appear that Steve had solved the problem of grading through the record keeping system he had developed. There was evidence in Steve's practice, however, that even though he felt he had resolved this problem, it was not totally resolved. There were instances when the tension between efficiency and student learning surfaced. As he tried to attend to both the efficient matter of turning student performance into grades on one hand, and actual student learning on the other, conflicts between the two goals caused him to accept a compromise. On one particular occasion, I observed an apparent conflict between Steve's efforts to efficiently correct student work as a whole-class activity and the substance of the lesson. The following vignette illustrates this conflict.

During one class session, Steve was leading the whole class through the correction of a Daily Geography worksheet. Students had been given the sheet several days before and had been given time to research the answers. Students were asked to name three states with a panhandle. When they got to that question on the worksheet, Steve told the class that a panhandle had "two right angles." As students shared answers, Steve wrote an abbreviation for each on the board. Steve accepted and wrote the following answers on the board: OK, ID, Wva, Ala, NM, Tenn, Miss, Utah, MD. When a student suggested New York, Steve did not directly dismiss the student's answer, but he ignored it and added to his previous definition saying that a "panhandle has three straight sides." He didn't write New York on the list. A student shouted out Alaska, but Steve ignored it. He added Pa, FL and NY to the list, even though he had previously rejected New York as a correct answer. One student said, "Florida doesn't have a panhandle." Steve said, "It is called a panhandle." He then added CT and NH to the list of accepted answers (KC.5SA.06.03.21).

In Steve's classroom, the challenge of assessing for a grade surfaced when he experienced this conflict in the classroom. The conflict between his efficient classroom routine and student learning forced him to make "in the moment" compromises in order to maintain the momentum of instruction and complete the activity in a timely manner. It has been documented that teachers tend to maintain the momentum of a lesson even if it compromises student learning (Kennedy, 2005). It was not possible for Steve to separate the need to efficiently get through the grading activity and his need to attend to student learning, but because these demands occurred simultaneously, he had to choose to compromise one or the other. The need to maintain the momentum of this activity and his

decision to ignore student confusion caused him to lose the potential advantage offered by the whole-class activity of correcting work.

**The Challenge of Steve's Theory of Learning**

Another conflict that underlay grading was Steve's desire to make social studies both interesting and valuable for his students as well as to quantify student learning into computed grades. Steve expressed concerns that reading the text could be a boring activity for students. In order to keep them actively involved in his lessons, he included activities that offered opportunities for both visual interest and hands-on variety. Throughout my interviews with him, Steve consistently espoused the learning theory that students would retain information better if it were acquired through a hands-on learning activity. While it is not possible to confirm the source of this theory, he cited his teacher preparation program for his use or belief in this theory of learning and that it had been confirmed for him through his years of teaching. Steve's rationale for including hands-on and artistic assignments was stated several times in interviews; he believed that students remember better when they do hands on activities. Steve noted that the teepee project for which students created a model of a teepee was "something that the kids can put their hands on and then they really remember more (KC.5SA.05.12.08). He believed that any time students could put their hands on something rather than just read about it, they would actually be able to recall it later more successfully than without such activities.

> We were reading about the Inuit Indians up in the Arctic in the northern part of Canada and I thought how are they going to remember anything about this even though I've seen a few questions over the years on this too. I've been finding little statues carved out of a soft stone that were carved by the Inuit and I brought those in. It is one thing for them to see a picture in the book of someone working on something, but another thing altogether for me to pass those things around the room and then talk about

> them and compare them to what we saw in the book. I know that things like that will stay with them. (KC.5SA.05.12.08)

One way that Steve included visual interest for his students can be illustrated with a classroom activity he designed to help them understand the three branches of the federal government.

> One thing I did was start a project where the kids had to do an illustrated poster showing each branch and it had to look like an organizational chart...show all three branches, who are the key people in each one, and underneath a breakdown of who works under them, and what their tasks are. Then they had to put illustrations on it. We pulled things off the internet. One thing the kids had to learn about was the president's cabinet. Who are members, and what are their jobs? We got on the internet in the classroom with that. And they knew, with the war in Iraq going on, who a lot of the key players were under Bush because their names are on TV all the time. So once they could see those same people as members of the cabinet and saw their positions and what they were responsible for that made that come alive for them. KC.5SA.05.09.28

Further, Steve tied active learning and visuals to his assessments of student learning as a way to augment students' learning. In assessing this project Steve "created some quizzes that had visuals on them as well. In some cases they had to fill in blanks or else they had to finish the organizational chart." In addition, he gave his students opportunities to participate in role-playing activities.

> Someone would be the president and they read a situation. Who would they have to talk to about getting something done? Or a bill comes to the president to sign, after he signs it what happens to it? Then we could talk about if it went to the supreme court to make sure that everything was written correctly and they interpret the law... we had some people sit down and actually act that out. KC.5SA.05.09.28

Thus, Steve faced the twin challenges of maintaining student interest in his lessons as well as ensuring retention of content knowledge. He delivered social studies instruction in a way that he felt would meet these two challenges. He developed what he believed to be meaningful learning activities as well as a means to assess his students

learning from these activities. His assessments were designed to turn student learning into a grade for the report card.

**Assessing Meaningful Learning Activities**

Steve believed that active projects would not only be more interesting for his students, but also they would spark substantive learning that would be retained better and longer than by merely reading the textbook. For Steve, substantive, long-term learning was embedded in the activities and projects he developed for his students. The challenge this belief raised for Steve was that it added to the already complicated task of making student learning visible in a way that could be measured. On one hand, Steve had a system that turned easily measurable content knowledge into a grade, but on the other hand, he was faced with the problem of turning deeper, substantive learning into a grade. Classroom observations and interviews with Steve revealed the tensions created by the on-going problem of assessing students' learning in social studies through meaningful learning activities, as well as finding a way to measure and translate what he considered to be substantive learning into a grade.

Steve had to develop his own resources of meaningful learning activities for social studies. While he believed that these kinds of activities were easier to find for the science curriculum, Steve used his creativity to develop projects that connected to the social studies curriculum. The learning activities Steve developed always contained an element of both visual interest as well as hands on items. He made a point of bringing in objects that students could actually see and touch, and that would connect to the reading from their textbook. His stated purpose for including such items was that it would be a "hook to remember it by."

> I know that things like that will stay with them. Next year when they are taking the [state assessment test], if any of those questions pop up, I'm hoping it will jog their memory about what we talked about. KC.5SA.05.12.08

> By creating requirements that involve them to actually do things, put the project materials together. They put more of themselves into it. I think that, not only is their learning going to be a little more complete because they've really lived the experience, but more of their emotions go into it so they have more investment. They're going to retain a lot more information about what we're doing and the terminology because I've been using that terminology every day and they have to use it and with their buy-in they're going to be less likely to drop that information to the wayside. KC.5SA. 06.05.24

In sum, Steve confirmed his strongly held belief that meaningful learning took place when students were interested and involved in the lessons. His main purpose for providing such learning activities was to ensure that they retained content knowledge.

***Substantive Projects.*** One such project, taken up in connection with the study of Native Americans, involved the creation of talismans. This learning activity included both visual interest as well as hands-on activities that would ensure both student interest and retention of Steve's learning goals. Steve made clear to his students that this was not merely an art project.

> At first the kids were thinking, "I get to work with beads and create this thing to wear." I had to say, "Hold it. When they wore these things they had meanings. If we are going to choose some objects to make for ourselves, let's tie some meaning to the ones we are making so each can tell a story." ...We defined what talisman and amulet meant...we talked about meaning of color in some cultures and how some symbols warriors would wear, some symbols elders would wear, so that it could help distinguish those people in their group. [Students] would come up with some self-created meanings for those objects on theirs and then they'll write down a description of that. KC.5SA.05.11.21

Name: _____ # _____ *Original Date: _____

Assignment: "TALISMANS"

SOCIAL STUDIES: NATIVE AMERICANS OF N. Am.

1. * Define Talisman • (4) pts.
2. * MATERIALS they can be made of. • (3) pts.
3. * Why they were are created + used. • (3) pts.
4. ☒ Make an Amulet or Talisman.
   - Choose beads, stones, feathers, and one or 2 small objects from home to include in the talisman.

• (30) pts.

5. * Write a description of what each object of the talisman is to symbolize. • (15) pts.
6. ⊕ After creating your talisman, Make a drawing of it: color it, too! • (15) pts.
7. ◘ Then on the final sheet, cut out and glue your drawing, or re-draw it and neatly copy all of your writings about the definition of, uses, and materials used, and your descriptions of the symbols-meanings of the objects you've used. • (30) pts.


Final Draft

Key

☒ Create a Talisman. (30) pts.

(125) pts * → All writings are rough drafts.

(15) pts ⊕ Color Drawing.

(30) pts ◘ The final draft, written neatly in cursive, with proper - Capitalization, punctuation and spelling, and the color drawing.

*Due Date: _____

RC.SSA.05.11.21

**Teacher Artifact - Figure 1**

***Assessment of the talisman project.*** Steve assessed his students' talisman projects using a self-developed rubric (Figure 1). Students defined talisman, explained what they were/are made of, and why they were created and used (10 points). After constructing their own talisman (30 points), they wrote a description of each material they used in its construction and the symbolism of each (15 points). They drew a picture of their own creation and colored it (15 points). The final draft of the completed project was evaluated for neatness, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and the color drawing (30 points). Looking at the breakdown of this project, 45% for drawing and construction of the talisman, 30% for the neatness and grammatical correctness of the written work and 25% for explaining the symbolism or meaning of various aspects of the talisman. Steve explained the rubric to the class at the outset of the project in order that they would understand the expectations and realize that this was not merely an art project, rather the project had meaning.

> I made a key so they could understand what each means, so when they are done with everything I'll give them a rubric that will have the point values I assigned based on the work I felt they did. They've got their points right up front. When they are working on something they can go, 'I know what this is for, we talked about this.' It's not like they are going to do this like a fun art project without realizing the meaning behind it.
> KC.5SA.05.11.21

Steve was able to give value to his students' understanding of the meaning carried with their talisman creation, while at the same time, three-fourths of the grade for the project captured more surface level features such as the artistic creation and neatness and grammar. Steve's rubric provided an efficient way to translate the project into a grade by breaking it down into points for both the artistic creation and the written output. While it is difficult to really know the quality of his students' learning or its lasting value, Steve

could quantify such things as writing mechanics and the artistic merits of his students' talisman projects. Steve believed that projects provided powerful learning activities for students, but when it came to grading these activities he had to rely on measures that were quantifiable. The tension that existed for him was that the learning he valued the most is difficult to quantify, so he was left to evaluate student output that could be quantified.

***Steve's Economics Unit.*** The economics unit Steve undertook with his class, which was more fully described in chapter four, also sought to develop deep subject matter knowledge as well as long-term retention. This was a large, long-term project that provided his students with many hands-on activities that provided for active participation in lessons. This unit is another example of the way Steve provided his students with activities that he believed would enhance their learning experience and result in long-term retention of subject matter knowledge.

> If we weren't actually going through making a business and them putting everything together, and talking about it with the terminology, none of them would even remember, I don't think, what a sole proprietor is. But because we are using that terminology everyday and when they buy their business license and it makes a difference in how much they are paying for a license based on whether they are in a partnership or a sole proprietorship, they had to tell the fines and fees clerks that information. They are going to be remembering the economics terminology they are using and that they need to know by actually living it. KC.5SA. 06.05.24

***Assessment of the Economics Unit.*** Steve's assessment of student learning throughout the economics unit was, for the most part, observational and informal, which will be discussed in the next chapter. He did, however, have several formal assignments that allowed him to measure student performance and apply a metric that could be

translated into a grade. Early in the unit, Steve had presented the vocabulary that students would be expected to understand for the unit. He checked their understanding with a vocabulary worksheet. These were corrected and scored with a percentage that was included in the marking period's letter grade. Another assignment that Steve could check for understanding was the poster students created to advertise their business. When looking at students' business poster, Steve checked to see if the poster included at least two of the advertising techniques that had been included in that lesson. When looking at their business license he checked to see that it included the business name as well as all the appropriate endorsements.

Steve incorporated the experiential activities he believed were so valuable to student learning into the economics unit but was left with no way to measure what they had actually learned from the experience. Though he had high goals for his students' learning, he had no way to translate their experiences into report card grades. Rather, he was forced to focus primarily on the vocabulary worksheet, the business poster, and the business license to measure surface features of the assignments that he could be translated into a grade.

The economics unit was a much longer, and more involved learning activity than either the teepee or the talisman projects, but it involved the same challenges for Steve. He needed to balance his learning goals for his students with activities he could actually see and assign some kind of metric that could be translated into a grade. In addition, though it was his desire that students would retain this content knowledge into the future, there was no way to measure this. Instead, he had to rely on some measurable student

output that could be turned into a report card grade and hope that students would retain the content knowledge.

***Grading Procedures***

Even though he reported his grading procedures as pretty "cut and dried," Steve responded to the particular situations of his students and allowed another factor to influence student grades. For the most part, he relied on percentages as reported by his computer based grading program, but he did choose to limit the penalty for late work.

> If a student didn't get it in on time I knocked 5 points every day if it was late, and I put a ceiling of 15 on that because I know that some of the kids don't get any help at home. So unless they get that assistance here, then their hands are tied when they are at home. [If] I couldn't work with them...I didn't want to penalize them beyond the 15 points. Otherwise they would still have struggled and done all of that effort and then handed it in and gotten a failing grade. I didn't want that to happen. (KC.5SA.05.11.21)

## Discussion

Both teachers in this study faced different dilemmas around the grading of their students. Sue sought ways to make the learning of reading "visible" in a way that she could quantify and turn into a report card grade. In addition, she held a personal belief about the importance of student effort and the way that should be reflected in report card grades. Sue's incorporation of effort in student grades raised further dilemmas for her, including problems with parents and lowering her expectations for student learning. Steve didn't recognize that he faced dilemmas concerning grading. He had instituted a number of routines and procedures in his classroom that facilitated the process for him. He no longer articulated grading as a problem, rather, he saw it as being fairly routine and unremarkable. However, these routines didn't always ensure that his students were

learning complicated subject matter. Despite his efficient routines, he continued to face the challenge of maintaining student interest in lessons as well as providing substantive learning experiences for his students. Because Steve designed lessons that portrayed complicated subject matter, it was difficult for him to measure and quantify student learning. Another dilemma Steve faced was that he wanted to ensure that his students would retain the knowledge he intended for them to learn. However, there was no way he could know or measure whether his students would remember content at some time in the future.

There are a number of factors that explain the reason these teachers experienced the grading of their students in different ways. One factor that accounts for this is the difference in the teachers' teaching experience. Sue was a relatively new teacher who was facing the grading of her students for the first time at Kensington School. The dilemma was fresh for her and she struggled to find a way to grade her students that could be justified, especially for parents. Steve had sixteen years of teaching experience. Over the years he had developed his own efficient routines and procedures that provided an efficient way for him to quantify student progress and turn this into report card grades. While Sue acknowledged her dilemma, once she came up with a means of grading her students that was reasonable to her, she refused to change student grades, even in the face of pressure from parents. On the other hand, Steve no longer experienced the dilemma of grading; he felt he had solved that problem with his routines. Even though he didn't acknowledge grading as a dilemma, he faced the problem of trying to quantify student learning that was not easily measured. He believed that his students learned best through the activities and projects he designed for them, but it was not easy to quantify the kind of

learning he valued. Because of this, Steve's report card grades came from assignments that were easily quantified, rather than from the kind of learning experiences that he believed were most valuable for his students.

Another factor that explains, in part, the way these teachers experienced the problem of grading differently is the subject matter taught by each. Sue taught reading and language arts; both of these subjects are covered by the state's accountability tests yearly. In addition, schools are expected to meet Adequate Yearly Progress measures under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in both reading and math. Sue experienced the pressure of high expectations from the district, the principal, and parents for good student performance on the state accountability tests. Steve, on the other hand, taught social studies. While students take a state assessment test covering social studies in the sixth grade, social studies is not part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Not only did Steve not experience the accountability expectations experienced by Sue, he did not even receive any feedback concerning his students' performance on the sixth grade test. While the faculty and principal of Kensington School carefully examined and dissected the test results for reading, writing, and math, there was no such scrutiny of the social studies results. In addition to the difference in accountability expectations for subject matter, there was also a difference at both the district and the building level of resources available for instruction of different subject matter. As the reading teacher, Sue had all the materials of the Four Blocks Literacy Model available to her. In addition, the instruction of reading was supported by the district through in-service training. At the building level, reading was fully supported by the entire faculty. Many staff meetings and professional development days at the building level were devoted to supporting the

instruction of reading. The academic support coach at Kensington School put most of her energies into the support of reading and writing instruction. This is contrasted with the experience of Steve. Social studies had no such support at the district or building level. The district-adopted textbook was available for Steve's use. Beyond that, he subscribed to Time For Kids and developed his own projects and activities that supported his instruction of social studies. Steve was left to his own devices to determine how best to instruct his students in social studies, whereas Sue was given the support of the entire educational community to help her instruct her students in reading and writing.

Another factor that influenced the way these teachers experienced the dilemma of grading can be seen in the difference in the connection each had to the building-wide community. Sue was assigned a mentor when she arrived at Kensington School. Sue's mentor model-taught lessons in reading and writing instruction, observed and critiqued Sue's instruction, provided materials for instruction, as well as advice on how to evaluate student work. Sue developed a close relationship with her mentor. When she received a parent's complaint about a report card grade, she turned to her mentor for advice. In addition, Sue developed mutually supportive relationships with a number of teachers as well as the principal. They provided support to each other concerning the instruction of reading and the grading of writing. Steve, on the other hand, was one of the first faculty members to arrive in the long-established, cohesive faculty at Kensington School. He did not have a mentor and was basically on his own to "figure things out." While he had cordial relations with other faculty members, he remained pretty much to himself when it came to figuring out how to go about teaching and grading social studies.

For each of these teachers, the resolution of the grading dilemma raised further dilemmas. For Sue, grading was a new experience. In her solution to the dilemma, she accounted for student effort in her grades. This led to a further dilemma when she received a parent complaint about a grade. For Steve, the grading dilemma had been resolved over years of teaching through the development of classroom routines and procedures that facilitated the quantification and grading of student learning. His efficient procedures, however, did not help him account for the kind of learning that he really valued. He was able to use assignments that were easily quantified to assign a report card grade, but he was not able to measure student learning that he considered as being valuable.

In the next chapter, I examine the way these teachers used assessment beyond assigning grades. Steve and Sue drew upon the rich resources available to them within the day-to-day context of their classrooms to assess what their students knew and were able to do.

## Chapter Seven

### Understanding Student Learning Through the Classroom Context

Teachers draw upon a numerous forms of assessment other than formal assessment. In the classroom context teachers draw upon a number of different ways available to them to come to an understanding of what their students know and are able to do. Teachers use student work products, such as homework and classroom assignments to learn about their students' progress. In addition, teachers rely on observation of student participation and behavior as well as their own one-on-one interactions with students to draw conclusions about their abilities. Teachers have reported relying on observational assessment methods more frequently than traditional assessment methods (Bol, Stephenson, O'Connell & Nunnery, 1998) to understand their students' learning. Research has shown that teachers use informal means in their day-to-day interactions in the classroom, such as classroom discussions, answers given to teachers' questions, and observing how students perform various classroom tasks (Salmon-Cox, 1981) to understand their students' learning. These forms of assessment are important because, as we saw in the case of Sue, teachers do not always trust standardized measures of student ability. Further, teachers form impressions of students' social and academic behavior and draw conclusions that shape their instruction. In sum, teachers do not depend solely on prescribed assessment instruments, such as the state assessment or the SRI to gauge their students' ability and progress. Rather, they draw on a number of informal ways available to them in the classroom context to assess their students' learning.

This chapter will look at the informal ways that Sue and Steve relied on to learn about their students. Particularly for Sue, paying close attention to her interactions with students, listening to their talk and reading their writing was a valuable means of understanding their learning and determining what she needed to do to facilitate that learning. Sue developed some assessments on her own, but she also used the tools provided by school mandates. For Steve, informal assessment was more tacit than in Sue's case. He used opportunities to listen to what students were saying, to watch them at work, and to question them both individually and in groups to discern what they were learning. Steve didn't have formalized mechanisms like those provided Sue.

This chapter will illuminate both the richness and the complexity of the sources teachers use to learn about their students. Teachers attend not only to the academic content of lessons, but also the social nature of learning. Prescriptive assessment proponents tend to reduce assessment to measurement of learning. While this is certainly important, teachers must also attend to social and behavioral considerations that cannot be measured prescriptively. Indeed, academic learning occurs within and through social interactions. Therefore, teachers' moves that take into account social interactions are not only, or even primarily, an attempt to keep things moving; they are attempts to ensure that learning can occur.

## *Sue's Understanding of Student Learning Through the Context of Her Fifth Grade Classroom*

Sue found opportunities in her classroom to learn about her students that were not drawn from either formal assessment or from her grading procedures. She used what she learned about her students to develop her instruction. Sue incorporated changes to her

instruction not because she needed to put a grade on the report card and not necessarily because students would need to be able to use or exhibit the skill or knowledge of particular content on the state assessment. Rather, it was through her close work with her students and careful observation of their work that she identified specific academic needs and responded to them.

***Understanding student learning through formative assessment of class work.*** Sue drew upon student work products in writing and reading to both understand student learning and to develop her instruction. In writing, for example, as Sue evaluated her students' writing, she learned about what they had learned from her instruction. Based on this information, she adjusted her up-coming lessons by re-teaching concepts that students had not grasped.

> I was reading some of their first take-home writing assignments last week. Usually we do all our writing together. They had these great leads and then they just kind of disappeared. The end of their story just kind of ended and there was no ending. They were writing a newspaper article and it just stopped. We're going to work on some things like that. These were things I thought they had down, but once I sent it home I went, 'I guess they really don't understand it.' So we'll have to revisit that. (KC.5SW.06.01.31)

Another student work product that Sue used as an informal assessment tool was the end-of-story comprehension questions provided by the textbook. As described in the previous chapter, Sue did not merely use these questions in order to assign a letter grade on the report card. She used them both as an assessment of students' understanding of the story being read, and also as a means of identifying particular problems students had with comprehension in order that she could incorporate remedial lessons. For example, when she noticed through whole-class correction of students' written answers to the end-of-

story comprehension questions that the class as a whole did not understand the author's purpose, she decided that she needed to "go back and do another lesson to go along with that." When she noticed during reading class that students had difficulty inferring, she asked more questions that required inference. She often revisited specific types of questions with which students seemed to have a problem.

> They were having trouble with inferring things this year. They get [concrete questions, like] 'What happened at this point in the story?' But 'What do you think will happen?' was a really hard thing for them to figure out...some were just reading the whole story and then going back [but] they weren't really inferring on their own. They were actually reading what happened next and then just writing the answer. So we had to talk about, 'This is your opinion. It's not necessarily a right or wrong answer' because I have some kids who need that 'right' answer. KC.5SW.05.12.08

Another way Sue adjusted her instruction was by including additional content to meet student needs. Through evaluation of her students' writing Sue determined that they did not have skills using the mechanics of English grammar. Sue found grammar worksheets among the materials that had been left in her classroom by the previous teacher. She incorporated them periodically into her lessons, selecting the worksheets that focused on the areas she identified that students needed to work on. Sue voiced her opinion that she felt her students needed to have good grammar in order to be good writers. "I don't know how they can be good writers without it" (KC.5SW.05.11.21).

Sue provided insight into the conclusions she drew about student learning based on their writing, as well as her own teaching, when she discussed the poetry books that were assembled as the culminating product of her poetry unit. It is important to focus on the poetry unit because it shows that Sue discovered the value of formative assessment in assessing student learning. After reviewing her students' books of poetry, Sue concluded

that her students created the best poems when she built in multiple opportunities to read and review their work, as she had done with the limerick.

> Some of the poems we assessed throughout, like the limerick. We did it on St. Patrick's Day. So they wrote up a final copy on a little shamrock. I had a chance to see that before the final-final copy. I think I liked that. KC.5SW.06.05.16

They had successfully followed the form of the poem and their poems made sense. Sue saw that her students were successful when she was able to read their work at several stages and provided them with multiple opportunities to re-do it. She was able to intervene in their learning and address their difficulties at each stage of the writing process.

By contrast, her students did not have as much success with some of the other poems.

> Some of the types of poems I didn't see until they were in the computer lab typing them or I was helping them fix a few things. Then they were turning them in and I'm like, 'You kind of went in a totally wrong direction here.' KC.5SW.06.05.16

One poem that Sue pointed out as being particularly confusing for her students was the couplet. She did not elaborate as to the reason/s she had not seen the couplet until the final product, whether it was due to time constraints, or if she didn't think they needed intervention at that point. Perhaps it was mere serendipity that the limerick was being studied near St. Patrick's Day and presented her with reasons to have students write them several times, whereas the couplet had no such connection with a holiday. When reading through her students' poems she determined that she had not effectively taught the couplet because students' poems showed general confusion about it.

> I ended up not even putting the couplet in the final book because the kids just *sort of understood* [emphasis in original] the idea, but they weren't getting the different lines and they had a really hard time with that. KC.5SW.06.05.16

She recognized that when she failed to review her students' work on the couplet in the same way she had on the limerick, the result provided a striking contrast in student work.

Further, Sue used the outcome of the poetry unit, not only to assess her students' work individually, but also as a means to evaluate her unit and adjust her instruction. At the time of this interview, Sue was trying to decide whether to include the lesson on the couplet or to delete it the next time she taught the unit.

> There's no set [list], like 'Here's what kind of poems you have to teach,' it's just, 'learn to write and read different types of poetry.' So that might be one that I don't even look at next year. KC.5SW.06.05.16

She reasoned that it really wouldn't matter if students didn't learn to write a couplet because the district standard did not require specific forms of poetry. Rather, the standard (Appendix Q) required students to apply "writing skills in a variety of types of writing, such as narratives, research, poetry, and informational works." This standard gave Sue some leeway in the construction of the poetry unit. She was not constrained in the content of her poetry unit, as she was, for example, when she followed the school-wide writing plan. The Kensington School writing plan was based directly on the state assessment. She followed and implemented the school writing plan in order to prepare her students to perform better on the state assessments. Her adherence to the plan did not take into account whether she felt the various forms of writing were important to her students as writers. When Sue reflected on her poetry unit, however, she did not have to restrict or conform the content to a prescribed formula, rather she chose the content,

chose to adjust or change the content, and she evaluated student work products in a way that she felt was useful for them as well as for her.

***Understanding student learning through one-on-one interactions.*** Sue found the school-mandated Four Blocks model to be helpful in understanding student learning. The Four Blocks literacy model provided Sue with opportunities to pay close attention to her students' learning during reading conferences. The SSR log (Appendix M), which was described in chapter four, provided Sue with a place to record specific notes about each student's reading and comprehension, including fluency, use of reading strategies, comprehension, and appropriate reading level of text during one-on-one conferences with each student. Sue's notes, made during reading conferences, provided a record across time of patterns of student comprehension of texts, of vocabulary words to work on, of comprehension problems and progress. Through her one-on-one conferences, Sue believed she came to know the specific needs of her individual students. She was able to target her reading conference questions specifically to meet what she perceived to be the needs of the student. These conference notes helped Sue by giving her a record of her students' performance as individual readers as well as to inform her of areas of general misunderstanding in the class that she could focus on in future lessons.

Sue diagnosed students' reading progress both on the spot during conferences, as well as by taking note across time in order to adjust her lesson plans for the class. For example, she learned through these conferences which words should be studied as vocabulary lessons.

> We do a lot of vocabulary study as part of our reading. [We] do that because that's another way to pull in some of those 'you didn't know what

> that word meant so what can you do to find out what it is?'
> KC.5SW.05.12.08

Sue chose specific vocabulary words for her lessons based on words her students didn't know when she listened to them read during reading conferences.

Individual reading conferences also contributed to Sue's understanding of her students in more informal ways. She drew upon her accumulated knowledge of her students in order to assess them on the required reading standards. When discussing the way she evaluated her students on the reading standards and the source she drew upon, Sue referred to the reading conferences.

> A lot of that did come from comprehension questions, but also from those conversations that I was able to have with the kids. 'Well, they didn't really get the author's purpose when they were answering those questions but when I talked with them they seemed to understand a little more' so then I might be able to change that. (KC.5SW.05.11.21)

Sue learned from talking to her students that sometimes they were able to answer questions orally that they had difficulty communicating in writing. Sue applied that understanding of her students when she assessed them on the reading standards and when she designed lessons.

Sue kept track of problems individual students were having when listening to them during reading conferences. She was able to remediate some reading problems during the conferences as well as plan follow up strategies for her students. For example, when she knew a student had difficulty with inferring, she directed more of those questions to that student during conferences. She didn't hesitate to stop a student after each paragraph if she felt the student did not understand the text.

> We'll talk about things, like if they're not sounding out words we'll stop...they are just, "it starts with an 'r' so it is this word." And that is something that a lot of the kids need to work on because it doesn't make

> sense. I tell them to "Stop every sentence if you have to." (KC.5SW.05.12.08)
>
> I have some who just want to keep reading and don't want to answer any questions. So we stop a lot and every paragraph we'll stop instead of reading a bigger chunk...they just read words and they don't think about it. (KC.5SW.05.12.08)

By listening to her students read during Four Blocks reading conferences, Sue learned about their specific weaknesses and was often able to respond to them during the conference.

As a demonstration of the way she used the reading log (Appendix M), Sue pulled out a student's SSR log and read from the notes she had made during one of their conferences. She pointed out that the form didn't specify questions to be asked; that was the teacher's decision depending on the material that was being read and the needs of the specific student. The form specified that comprehension was to be assessed using the qualifiers "excellent," "good," "fair," or "poor." Sue read from the student's SSR log:

> I usually write myself notes, [like] what kind of questions I asked [and] what their answer was. [This] student was reading a story about Anna and a big storm. When I was student teaching we read that as a whole class so I know that book really well. There is a big storm and the store is closed and she goes with Grandpa [to a store]. When I asked her why she thought the door was locked she said it was jammed and they took a day off of work. We had just read three pages about how there is this big storm and everything is closed. So we had to go back and look at it again. So I wrote myself a note that she is coming up with ideas but they do not have to do with the story. So that is something that she and I are going to need to work on during our self-selected reading times. I had to try to be very explicit with the note or I would have lost it. I just read with her yesterday so I still remember but I write a lot of little notes in here. KC.5SW.05.12.08

In addition to noting that the student's comprehension had been poor, Sue noted that the student hadn't understood the whole premise of the story and that basic comprehension

questions needed to targeted to that student. Also, she noted that she should stop the student often to check comprehension.

***Understanding student learning through classroom interactions.*** While some researchers argue that teachers *should* rely on standardized test results to "diagnose student needs, group students intelligently, assign meaningful grades, or evaluate the impact of instructional treatments" (Stiggins, 1991), it is widely acknowledged that teachers rely more consistently on their own observations of students to make such decisions (Stiggins & Bridgeford, 1985; Daniel & King, 1998; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992; Wilson, 1992; Salmon-Cox, 1981). While standardized test results can provide one source of information about students, such tests cannot provide information that takes into account the complex social environment of the classroom. Each teacher must establish a classroom climate that ensures student compliance with behavioral norms. At the same time, they must forge emotional bonds with students in order to encourage effort on their part as well as maintain their interest in lessons (Lortie, 1975). It is important to look at the ways teachers group students together for instruction because learning occurs in and through social interactions. Teachers' grouping decisions weigh not only academic but also social considerations to ensure that learning can occur.

Sue made daily choices about whether her students would work independently, in pairs, or in groups during instruction. These decisions were based on what she had learned about her students' behavior and work ethic, as well as their academic abilities.

The following table reports on the different ways that Sue grouped students during the fourteen classroom observations I made in Sue's classroom. The table indicates whether students worked independently, in pairs, or in groups during the

observed lesson. It also indicates whether the teacher assigned students to pairs or groups, or whether students made the choice of who to work with.

**Sue's Grouping Practices During Observations**

| Obs | Independent | Pair | Group | Whole Class | Student choice | Teacher choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | writing journal | | | reading | | ● |
| 2 | SSR | | | | | |
| 3 | worksheet | | | instruction | | ● |
| 4 | SSR | | Haiku activity | | | ●* |
| 5 | Worksheet/ writing journal | | Haiku activity | Instruction/ practice | | ●* |
| 6 | SSR/ district writing assess. | | | | | |
| 7 | SSR | | | Tcr read aloud | | |
| 8 | Writing journal | | | instruction | | ● |
| 9 | SSR | | | Tcr read aloud | | |
| 10 | Writing journal | | | Review test/ instruction | | ● |
| 11 | SSR | | | | | |
| 12 | Worksheet/ district writing assessment | | | Review personal narrative | | ● |
| 13 | SSR | | | | | |
| 14 | Read story/ Cross-text analysis | Pair read | | | ● | |

SSR=Sustained Silent Reading

**Table 12**

Table 12 shows that for most lesson activities students worked independently. In two lessons (numbers four and five) Sue had her students work in groups with their seating partners. In one lesson (number fourteen), Sue allowed the students to read in pairs and to choose their reading partner.

To summarize the table of observations, it appears that Sue made most of the decisions about when her students would work independently or in groups. In the two

* Observations 4 & 5: Students worked with seat partners. Seating assignments made by the teacher.

lessons in which students worked in groups, Sue had essentially chosen the grouping because the groups were based on seating arrangements. Sue reported that she based her seating chart decisions on behaviors she had observed in the classroom and on her knowledge about which students could or could not get along together. In observation number fourteen, when students were allowed to choose a partner with whom to read, Sue warned the students that she reserved the option to separate students who did not focus on the assignment.

From table 12, it appears that Sue did not group her students for instruction. However, none of the fourteen observations were of guided reading time during which her students were, for the most part, paired up. Sue's guided reading time coincided with Steve's social studies lessons, so I never saw her guided reading lessons on the days I observed classes. As prescribed by the Four Blocks format, guided reading occurred everyday. Sue did discuss in interviews that she had specific reasons for the way she paired her students for guided reading.

> When we are doing guided reading I do more partners than groups just because I think that works better and they focus better. But I don't usually let them choose (KC.5SW.05.12.08).

Sue's choice of using pairs rather than groups seems to be based on the classroom management concern of having students remain "focused" on their work. Groups provide more opportunities for student interactions that can disrupt the lessons.

Further, Sue explained what she took into consideration when pairing her students for guided reading.

> I look at the student's reading level and try to decide how to put them together. Usually I like to put sort of "like" students together. I don't want to put that highest student with the lowest student because they are just so far apart. But I don't want to put that lowest student with another low

> student. So I kind of pull from the middle for the really low kids. The high kids I end up pairing together just because I think they are going to work better together and not be frustrated. Those middle and low kids I just kind of pair together so that they are closer in levels. KC.5SW.05.12.08

It is important to remember that, because Sue didn't really trust the SRI as an indicator of student reading level, she drew upon her own knowledge of her students and the judgment she made of their reading level. She gained this information from the individual reading conferences she had with her students. In addition to considering reading levels, she was also concerned about maintaining the work environment of the classroom. She wanted her students to be able to "work better together" and felt that frustration would lead to acting out.

In addition, Sue paired students when she and a second grade teacher put their students together as reading buddies once a month. In addition to the students' reading level, again, behavior and work ethic were of concern to her.

> The second grade teacher and I sat down and we did that with the reading level. Who is kind of a high second grader and a high 5th grader? We wanted them to be similar, but then we also have to look at their behavior just because you have to know who doesn't work well together and who is not going to focus with so-and-so. That's a big part too with that reading instruction because it's important for them to focus on what they are reading and answer when we're doing comprehension questions. KC.5SW.05.12.08

Through her experience with her students, Sue had come to know what she could expect from them in the way of behavior and whether or not they were likely to be conscientious about completing their work. She acquired this knowledge in the context of working with them in her classroom and seeing them perform over time. In addition, as we saw in the previous chapter, Sue didn't trust the SRI to determine her students' reading level. Sue

trusted her own knowledge of her students as readers that she had acquired through the individual reading conferences.

## Steve's Understanding of Student Learning Through the Context of His Fifth Grade Classroom

For Steve, a respectful classroom environment was important. In order to understand how he learned about his students through day-to-day interactions, it is important to know what kind of atmosphere he tried to maintain daily. Steve constantly modeled the respectful language and behavior he wanted his students to use with each other. Throughout my observations of his teaching, Steve was always even-toned and maintained a calm demeanor with his students. I never heard him raise his voice despite the occasional chaos that occurred when students were working on projects. He was always respectful of his students and praised his students often. When correcting work together, he often responded with praise, such as "good thinking process." If a student's response was incorrect he avoided directly stating that it was incorrect; he often had them go back to the text to find evidence to support their answer; in this way, they usually corrected their own error. On one such occasion when another student found evidence to support his classmate's answer, Steve responded with "you have a good researcher sitting next to you." (KC.5SA.06.03.21).

***Understanding student learning through observation.*** Steve made daily choices about whether his students would work independently, in pairs, or in groups during instruction. These decisions were based on what he had learned by observing his students and through the classroom interactions he had with them over the school year.

The following table represents the eleven classroom observations that were made in Steve's classroom for this study. The table indicates whether students worked independently, in pairs, in groups or as a whole class. It also indicates whether the grouping decision was the students' choice or the teacher's choice.

In observations one and two, Steve assigned the students to read with seat partners. In observation number three, collaboration was optional at the students' choice. In observation numbers seven through eleven, students had previously chosen to work either independently or with a partner of their choice.

**Steve's Grouping Practices During Observations**

| Obs | Independent | Pair | Group | Whole Class | Student choice | Teacher choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | Read text/ write paragraph | | | | • |
| 2 | | Read TFK/ write paragraph | | | | • |
| 3a | DG | | | | • | |
| 3b | • PKT | • | • | | • | |
| 4 | Read text; write questions/answers | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | TFK correction | | |
| 6 | | | | Text questions correction | | |
| 7 | • EC | • | • | Instruction (poster) | • | |
| 8 | • EC | • | • | Instruction (advertising) | • | |
| 9 | • EC | • | • | Instruction (advertising) | • | |
| 10 | • EC | • | • | | • | |
| 11 | • EC | • | • | | • | |

DG=Daily Geography; TFK=Time for Kids; PKT=continent geography packet; EC=economics unit

**Table 13**

It is interesting to note the difference between Steve and Sue's use of grouping for instruction. In this table we see that Steve had his students work in groups often, while Sue's table indicates that this occurred only rarely in her classroom. This section will look at why Steve made grouping decisions the way he did, how he grouped his students, and what he learned from it.

Steve's decisions concerning grouping were closely tied to his philosophy about the way students should be treated as well as the atmosphere he liked to maintain in his classroom.

> I like to give them the choices. I like, rather than saying, "This is who you are going to work with," to say, "I'd like you to choose someone or ask someone to work with you. You need to get a partner." I like to give them some choices because a lot of what we are doing this year is getting them ready for middle school. I want them to get used to more independence. I don't want to say, "This is who you will work with, and this is where you are going to work." I give them some choices and within the structure of that they have to make those choices. It gives them a feeling of being able to make choices rather than just being told or dictated to. KC.5SA.05.12.08

For Steve, maintaining a smooth-running classroom was important. His routines and procedures worked to support this as well as the way he allowed his students to make choices. Student cooperation was important to keeping lessons moving along and making the best use of time.

> For most of the independent activities, I let them choose their partner or choose to work alone. I know that if I give them a block of half an hour and say you need to get x amount accomplished and the project is not due for another week…I'll tell them they can work with the partner of their choice. KC.5SA.05.12.08

He was able to keep control of the behavior of his students because he did not hesitate to separate students who did not focus on the assignment at hand. He also reserved the right to assign students to a workspace where he could keep a closer watch over their work.

> We have a pod outside the classroom so sometimes partners can work in the pod if it looks like they are doing a good job. A lot of the kids like working out there so that gives them some incentive to stay on task rather than sit there and socialize. KC.5SA.05.12.08

Students knew they would be separated if they did not work on the assignment, and for the most part, they responded to the opportunity to work with their friends in the way Steve wished.

When Steve made grouping choices for his students, he had specific reasons for grouping them as he did. In observations one and two, Steve had students work with seat partners. These are labeled teacher's choice because Steve had made the seating arrangement decisions based on what he had learned about his students through classroom interactions and his knowledge about the way his students would behave when seated near each other.

Steve pointed out that there were specific times when he made partner assignments, rather than allowing student choices.

> In some of the structured activities if I'm timing it or if I want them to break away from what they are used to then I'll insist that I choose the partner. KC.5SA.05.12.08

These assignments were made based on deliberate criteria. When he assigned partners for students, he weighed the complexities of social and academic considerations.

> It's never really the same reasons. With one particular student one time I might, if she's a student who has been struggling, I may pair her with another student who is doing really well. Just because they may not be social friends, but I want the two to work together so the student who is really on top of it and knows what's going on can assist the other. At other times I will make decisions based on whether that pair might be too social so then I'll suggest that they either work on their own or that they choose someone that they don't normally choose. KC.5SA.05.12.08

Steve illustrates the range of issues teachers have to deal with as they think about student learning--from learning the subject matter to learning how to interact productively.

When Steve did assign students to groups, without giving them their own choice, he could come up against some resistance. Steve maintained that same calmness that was described previously when working with difficult students. In one interview, he told a story about a student who was not happy in the group to which he had been assigned.

> He preferred to be in a different group and because he couldn't be he just sat there and folded his arms and started to pout. It made it hard for that group but I felt that it was still a great learning situation because they were pretending that they were part of a company that was working on this piecework project. I said, 'You know, there will be times in real life where an employer at a company is going to find that he's got a difficult employee or he's got someone who's going to refuse to do that work and you guys are still trying to get this contract. You still have to figure out how you are going to do it even though that employee isn't coming through.' I talked with the student and he still wasn't going to participate so he had a consequence later but I just let him sit there because I wanted the others to work with the fact that he wasn't assisting them. (KC.5SA.05.12.08)

This story reveals not only the way Steve learned about his students through classroom interactions, but also how he found life lessons in every situation. There was more to be learned from this assignment than the academic lesson at hand. Steve turned this incident into an opportunity to teach social skills as well. Further, this may be an additional reason why, for the most part, Steve allowed his students to choose their own work partners rather than assigning them.

***Understanding student learning through informal assessment.*** Steve's economics unit, as described in chapter four, was a year-long, experiential project for his

students. While Steve had several assignments that could be quantified and translated into a grade, most of this project was evaluated through informal observational assessment.

> I'll say everything I am assessing for the economics unit is going to be informal, with the exception of worksheets that we had about a month ago where we talked about the terminology and the concepts. KC.5SA.06.05.24

Steve described the way he was using classroom interactions to assess his students' understanding of the terminology from the unit.

> I'm not doing any kind of a formal assessment where I find out, 'OK, which terminology did you remember and are you using it correctly?' But I am picking up on that just from what I am hearing [in the classroom]. KC.5SA.06.05.24

Steve listened to the way his students used the terminology and showed their understanding in their project work. As his students busily prepared for the culminating sales event, Steve walked around from group to group, observing what they were doing, listening to their discussions, and asking and answering questions. In an interview, he identified some specific things he would be looking for on their first sales day. "The final part of it is going to be how they're doing when they open their business and how they relate to the customers." (KC.5SA.06.05.24).

Steve scheduled a debriefing session that followed the first sales day. He asked his students to reflect on how the event went for them.

> I want them to find out from what they were selling, did things move fast? Did they move *too* fast? Did they move too slow? Were there some things that just didn't sell? Where were you located? Did you get many customers? Should you change location? Should you change pricing? Should you change the way you had your product displayed? Things like that. We'll talk about that after this first time they have been opened. We will talk about evaluating those things so they can decide when they open next Friday what they need to change. KC.5SA.06.05.24

Thus, the debriefing session provided Steve with information about student learning, but it also provided students with a way to assess their own performance and adjust their business based on what they learned. Steve identified the second sales day as the most important observation he would make in order to know what his students had learned.

> When they open the second time, in another week, I'll find out what they have learned from it because they have to make some kind of changes. KC.5SA.06.05.24

Steve drew on classroom interactions, watching his students working on their projects, and observing the way they adjusted their business operations in order to assess the learning that took place in his economics unit.

***Understanding student learning through formative assessment.*** Steve acknowledged in an interview that he saw the need to implement more formative assessment opportunities with his students. He understood that formative assessment could provide information that would help him adjust his instruction. Steve voiced the need to take measures of student progress more often than his unit tests.

> What I've realized through what I've done so far is that I want to give them more periodic quizzes so that I'm getting feedback on a regular basis of where they actually are, what they've picked up on so that I know whether I need to hit something else or not, or hit it in a different way, like revisit it as a review. Again with the unit test, there are a few things that I didn't quiz on before I gave the unit 1 test and I found there were a lot of students who missed a couple things, where all of them had missed out on that. If I had quizzed them beforehand I would have found that out before giving the test. (KC.5SA.05.12.08)

That interview took place in early December. The topic of formative assessment was revisited in an interview at the end of the school year. Steve shared that he had not instituted formative quizzes to inform his instruction prior to giving unit tests.

The lack of formative assessment in Steve's classroom illuminates his strongly held belief about student learning. He believed that substantive student learning came from experiential and participatory learning his students gained by being involved in projects, rather than from textbook learning. Importantly, the kind of learning that Steve valued couldn't be readily quantified and translated into a numerical grade. Textbook learning, such as that measured by the unit tests, could be quantified and turned into a grade. Even though Steve acknowledged at one point that he could have learned more about what his students were learning as they progressed through the textbook unit, he didn't really value that kind of knowledge about his students' learning; that kind of learning was reserved for assigning a grade. The important, substantive learning that took place in his classroom was difficult for him to measure. That is why he relied on observational assessment for his yearlong economics unit. The important learning wasn't connected to a grade. Instead, Steve believed that the important learning that his students attained was long term and immeasurable. All of the assessment considerations Steve cited in his interviews centered on coming up with a report card grade. His formal assessments, such as unit tests, were summative and, along with daily work and other projects, became part of the marking period grade. It was the on-going, daily assessments that he made of student learning through interactions with them through which he sought to assess what he viewed as their actual learning.

### *Discussion*

What we see in this chapter is the range of rich resources the classroom context provides for teachers to understand their students' learning. Teachers do not rely solely

on prescribed assessment as a way to understand their students' learning. Rather, they draw upon their experiences with their students in the classroom to provide valuable information about students. For Sue, it was important to use close work with her students to understand their learning. In her case, a resource provided through Four Blocks, the mandated format for reading instruction, brought a useful tool with which to pay attention to her students' learning, the SSR log. Informal observational assessment provided Sue with another layer of understanding of her students. Perhaps it was because she was a new teacher that she needed to use her close work with her students to understand their learning. Observational information is a valuable way of gaining understanding of students that cannot be prescribed. Although, in Sue's case, it was the prescribed Four Blocks model that gave her a useful tool with which she could organize and preserve her observational understanding of her students.

Sue did not use all of the resources that came to her through mandates equally. For example, she rejected the SRI as a valid measure of students' reading level. It appears that Sue chose to use the tools that facilitated close work with her students and their work products. It was those tools in which she had the most trust. Tools, such as the SSR log and the reading conferences, supported her close work with her students and provided her with information that she drew upon for on-going assessment of her students as well as immediate, on-the-spot interventions that addressed student learning as well as her own instruction. Decisions that could be postponed to the future, such as adjusting her poetry unit, were based on other things, such as the state standard that allowed her some room to make decisions. Again, we see that she accommodated the tools that were provided to

her, but in some instances she made her own decisions about which tools were important to her work and how she would use the tools in her everyday practice.

For Steve, informal observational assessment of his students' performance in the classroom was the best way he could try to understand what they were learning from his long term economics unit. In part, this was due to his beliefs about student learning and the types of learning opportunities he provided for his students. They were not easily quantified and turned into a grade. In addition, he didn't value the surface knowledge that could actually be measured. He provided his students with active, participatory, experiential projects through which they would learn concepts and ideas that he hoped would remain with them for a long time.

It is interesting to look at the contrast in the grouping decisions made by these teachers. Steve made his grouping decisions based on his philosophy about the way students should be treated and about the level of independence they should experience. Sue didn't think philosophically when making her grouping decisions. Rather, she paired students for guided reading based on her perception of students' reading levels and the behavior she could expect when different students worked together. Steve's decisions have more grounding in his beliefs about students and student learning than Sue's. This can be explained in part because of Sue's relative inexperience in teaching. Over the years Steve had come up with a range of strategies for assessing student learning in informal, tacit ways that were hard to see in classroom observations. It came out through interviews that he had developed strategies to help him see student learning. One strategy he used was grouping. It allowed him to enact his philosophy of student learning and it allowed him to learn about his students in informal, almost invisible ways. One of the

reasons proponents of prescriptive assessment are critical of teachers is that they don't think teachers use assessment. In some classrooms, it may not *look* as if teachers are assessing, whereas, they may indeed be involved in subtle, tacit ways of assessing their students. What Steve shows us is that if we observe teachers and look for formal, overt forms of assessment, we may miss the important and subtle forms of assessment that teachers utilize in their classrooms. At the same time, Steve said that he should have used more formative assessment in his social studies instruction. He noted that he would have learned about how his students were doing before the summative unit test. Steve is a good example of how teachers' work can be misinterpreted. He is grounded with a rationale for what he does in the classroom and he is clear about what he believes about student learning. But Steve also shows us the limits of informal assessment. He acknowledged that there was a need for more than just informal assessment and if he had used more formative assessment he might have been able to intervene and help his students' learning.

Formative assessment is a valuable tool that allows teachers to understand their students' learning and, as in Sue's case, to develop their instruction. Some external mandates can actually shut down the formative assessment process. In the case of SRI, Sue didn't rely on it because she didn't find it valid. The 20 day plan shut down the process because, not only did teachers not have time to teach the entire plan, but also they didn't have time to adjust their instruction based on what they learned from it. Other external mandates, such as Four Blocks, have actually built in opportunities for very careful, close interaction with students. Steve had to build those opportunities into his instruction himself; he didn't have formalized tools such as those that Sue had. Careful

attention needs to be paid to the types of mandates that are put into place so as to assure that these classroom processes are not shut down. Teachers need to have opportunities to conduct the kind of work they think is very important.

While Sue learned about her students through close attention to their work, the state assessment was not without influence. The state assessment influenced the way she attended to what she learned from working closely with her students. In the case of the state assessment and the school writing plan, if Sue found that students did not perform well on writing assignments, she needed to address those problems immediately. As in the case of her poetry unit, however, when content was not prescribed Sue had leeway to postpone a decision about her instruction or even decide not to cover that topic at all.

# Chapter Eight

## Conclusions

While the school reform movement has succeeded in legislating mandated accountability testing in America's schools, policy makers and stakeholders on both sides of the issue argue over its effects. Proponents of accountability testing argue that highly qualified teachers must teach to rigorous content standards and that instructional materials and curriculum must be aligned to those standards. Further, they argue that standardized test results give teachers information they need to improve their teaching, thereby improving student learning. Opponents argue, in response, that yearly accountability tests overrule teachers' tacit knowledge about teaching and result in a curriculum that only covers what is on the test and that superficial knowledge of that content is all that will be taught.

It became apparent during this study that neither side of the accountability dichotomy has it entirely right. Instead, when I examined Steve and Sue's practices closely, I saw a dynamic interaction of micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors that influenced their decision making in their classrooms. A complex mix of personal preferences, teaching experience, and day-to-day experiences with students shaped each teacher's classroom practice. The district and the principal added mandates on top of those promulgated by NCLB. This resulted in overlapping mandates that teachers tried to accommodate in order to improve student learning. The broader policy context with the emphasis on assessment and accountability became woven among these other factors.

The decisions Steve and Sue made about assessing their students were bound up with all three of these levels of influences in a dynamic, not static way. I came to see that the rationale these teachers employed to make assessment decisions was situated in a complex environment and shaped by their interpretations of multiple messages they got from the environment in which they conducted their work.

## What Shapes Assessment Practices?

The two teachers in this study were impacted to different degrees by several factors. In particular, the situated action perspective employed in this study made visible the relationship between each teacher's individual practices, their relationships with other school actors, and the presence of mandates from the state, the district, and the school. The way the state assessment entered into teachers' practice was mediated by all of these factors.

### *Proliferation of Mandates*

Since the passage of NCLB, states have scrambled to align their curriculum and state assessments with federal mandates. As states have instituted more mandates, districts and schools have followed suit. This study showed the way these processes worked in Kensington School; both the district and the school mediated and complicated the messages teachers received about accountability and assessment from federal and state policies. The district implemented common assessments in reading and math that schools were to administer each semester, produced 20-day plans that prescribed how teachers were to prepare their students for the state assessments, and created the academic support coach position in the Title I schools which provided in-class support for teachers, especially in the areas of reading and writing. The district also instituted the Fast

ForWord program to support readers who were below grade level. The principal supported the mandates of the district by ensuring that teachers administered the SRI quarterly and insisted that teachers complete the full district adopted math curriculum. She further mandated the use of Four Blocks for reading instruction and acquired the services of Lindamood-Bell to support readers who were below grade level. She also requested that Mary Locke write a school-wide writing plan and mandated that teachers turn in their writing lesson plans weekly for her review. All of these mandates were intended to help teachers better instruct their students and ensure that the school would continue to meet AYP expectations.

*Co-existing and Overlapping Demands*

All of this policy making at the district and school levels resulted in co-existing and often overlapping mandates that teachers had to deal with. Research has shown that instructional policy, especially those policies aligned with accountability systems, enacted at higher levels in the system can result in such overlapping of mandates (Spillane, 1996), especially when there is no coordination between the district and school levels (Wong, Buice & Cole, (2006). In the case of Kensington School, some district and school mandates provided multiple tools intended to address the same problem. For example, some of the tools intended to help teachers group their students for instruction included the SRI, Four Blocks' guided reading procedures, as well as the Lindamood-Bell assessments. Both Fast ForWord and Lindamood-Bell programs were aimed at supporting students who read below grade level. Further, these mandates brought different people into classrooms to demonstrate lessons for teachers and to monitor compliance. Mary Locke demonstrated lessons in Four Blocks instruction as well as

lessons intended to help students write successfully on the state assessment. Instructors from Lindamood-Bell demonstrated lessons using structure words in writing. In addition, the classroom teachers taught lessons in writing to meet language arts standards. One teacher expressed the confusion she thought this raised for students and hinted that it confused her as well. Some mandates actually presented contradictions that teachers tried to accommodate, but were frustrated with. The district's 20-day plans did not take into account that teachers did not have twenty school days available prior to administering the state assessment in which to present the lessons included in the plan. Further, this plan didn't end up helping teachers adjust their instruction to meet student needs because there was no time for them to do so before the assessment.

*Discrepancy in Tools and Resources*

A further consequence of district and school accountability-oriented policy making was that resources were not evenly distributed among various subjects. This study highlighted the discrepancy in tools and resources made available to teachers within the same school. In addition to curricular and instructional mandates, Sue also had many tools available to support her teaching of reading and writing. She had the Four Blocks model of literacy instruction, the support of the academic support coach, technical support for below grade level readers in the form of Fast ForWord and Lindamood-Bell, inservice training and professional development opportunities, as well as assessment rubrics from the state to assess writing. By contrast, Steve was left to his own devices to figure out how to teach and assess social studies.

In part, the difference in resources and tools available to these teachers was due to the importance placed on some subjects under NCLB. Subjects that fell under NCLB

mandates, such as reading and math, received more attention, and therefore, more tools and resources from the district and school were devoted to those subjects. While social studies was tested on the state assessment, it received very little attention and few resources were directed at social studies teaching by the district and school because it was not a priority under NCLB. While Sue got detailed feedback on her students' performance on the state assessment at the school's SIP meeting as well as the collective support of the faculty who agreed to work together toward improving those results, Steve never received any feedback on his students' performance on the sixth grade social studies test. Whatever gets prioritized at the federal level then gets prioritized at the state level, and so on, down to the school level with a proliferation of mandates and efforts to address these priorities. One benefit of such priorities is the expanding amount of resources and tools that are made available to support the teaching of reading, writing, and math. On the other hand, teachers can be overwhelmed with the demands made upon them with overlapping and sometimes contradictory mandates.

*Social Relationships*

In this study, I traced how district and school mandates entered into Steve and Sue's practices in the form of tools and resources. School actors were important carriers of these tools and resources. At Kensington School, Mary Locke and the principal were crucial to the translation, production and implementation of both district and building-wide mandates. This was especially evident in the case of Sue. Sue had a plethora of resources and tools available to her, in part because she taught reading and writing, but also in part because of her close relationship to Mary Locke. Because of her district appointment and her history with Kensington, Mary carried the authority of both the

district and the school. Importantly, she also had a personal relationship with Sue that reinforced Sue's use of mandated materials and assessments. By contrast, Steve had few such close collegial relationships outside his classroom that were evident. Further, he taught social studies which received little attention from the district or the school. He determined how to assess his students and designed his instruction based largely on his own experience and professional beliefs.

## Reexamining Extant Research

I began this study by laying out three prominent strands of educational literature that have looked at the issue of teachers' assessment practices. I identified the prescriptive, classroom context, and cultural strands of literature that each seek to explain the ways teachers assess or *ought* to assess their students. In this section, I explain how this study contradicts, substantiates, or extends each of these literatures.

### *Prescriptive Literature*

Proponents of standardized testing are critical of teachers' assessment literacy. They assert that teachers do not adequately assess their students' learning and, are not able to objectively measure student achievement. They advocate the use of standardized tests as a means by which to counter teachers' subjective grading. This study suggests that school actors will respond to standardized tests in some of the ways that their proponents propose. The principal and teachers of Kensington School carefully examined the test results of the state assessment. Student progress was evaluated collectively rather than individually. Ms. Mathews' report identified areas in which most students needed improvement. The teachers agreed that writing needed to be the new focus of instructional improvement. Sue responded to this information by following the school

writing plan as designed by Mary Locke. She based her writing instruction on the assessment results and used the state assessment rubrics to evaluate her students' writing. The assessment results in math were taken as confirmation of the schools' past attempts to improve instruction in math. The assessment results in reading also indicated that improvements had been made. In order to continue that trend, the school decided that the Four Blocks Literacy Model and the Scholastic textbook series would continue to be used.

While the school, thus, did utilize standardized test scores to make instructional decisions, proponents of standardized testing might argue that such tests should be looked at individually, rather than collectively. However, in the case of this study, the district and principal held such results. The assessment results were given to the teachers as reports by grade level. Perhaps this is an indication that the district and principal did not trust teachers' assessment literacy. Whatever the reason, considering the multiple demands put upon these teachers and the confusion such demands caused, the review of collective assessment results may offer the best way to ensure that teachers are offered plausible rather than impossible demands. The manner in which the Kensington principal had teachers review the assessment allowed the teachers to form their instructional decisions. Had each teacher considered the assessment results of each individual student and tried to design an appropriate instructional response, the results might have been overwhelming and might not have been carried out.

Proponents of alternative assessment also claim that teachers do not understand how to use alternative forms of assessment nor do they know how to create their own effective assessment tools. The case of Steve would tend to substantiate such claims. The

projects and activities that Steve used in his social studies instruction could be labeled as authentic learning activities as described by Wiggins (1990). While Steve's projects, such as the economics unit, allowed his students to engage in real tasks, he lacked ways to formally document and provide students feedback on their learning. This inhibited his ability to adjust his teaching to meet the needs of his students, an integral part of Wiggins' description of authentic assessment. Steve's case substantiates what many who advocate authentic assessment criticize in teachers' practice. Torrance (1993), for example, found that teachers fail to plan their curriculum based on information derived from performance assessments. Steve's movement through his set curriculum without providing feedback to his students concerning their performance and without altering his instruction to attend to emergent student needs and difficulties supports this claim. Steve's assessment of his students' learning remained tacit; he did not formally attain information from his students concerning their performance in a way that could inform his instruction. His assessment of their performance throughout the unit consisted of a few assignments that evaluated only the most basic elements of student learning, not the type of higher order skills and knowledge that Steve hoped his students actually developed through the activities.

Another argument made by proponents of mandated standardized testing is that such testing will ensure more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes by holding all students and schools accountable to the same standards. While this study did not specifically address this issue and, therefore, can neither contradict nor substantiate it, I proffer my own conclusion here. This argument might hold true if all schools had access to the same resources, both financial and human; but in reality, they do not. The district

in which Kensington exists had adequate resources to support efforts to maintain AYP; the district supported programs such as Fast ForWord, provided textbooks for all students, offered appropriate professional development to support instruction in the methods district officials deemed most suited to meeting AYP, and district officials created the position of academic support coach for all Title I schools. Not all districts and schools can support such programs. As long as there are schools in which students are not provided adequate instructional materials, in which teachers are not provided appropriate professional development, and that lack adequate funding to maintain safe and healthy facilities, the disparity of learning opportunities will remain a reality for many students. Students in schools labeled "failing" under the NCLB system are most likely to be taught by the least qualified and least experienced teachers. In order to really offer equitable learning opportunities to all students, we need to have a system that provides equitable financial support for all students. The system of merely offering rewards for success and sanctions for failure seems, to me, to be doomed to perpetuate the inequality already endemic in our school system.

*Classroom Context Literature*

The classroom context literature describes the way teachers build their understanding of their students' progress by drawing upon various sources of information available to them through day-to-day classroom interactions. Teachers have multiple purposes and ways of assessing students' academic as well as social growth as observed in the classroom.

Opponents of mandated assessment claim that such tests will make teachers' tacit knowledge about teaching and about students unimportant and thus, over time work to

deskill teachers and constrain their autonomy. The findings of this study suggest that opponents of mandated testing need not fear that teachers' tacit understanding of their students will disappear because of such tests. Both of the teachers I studied relied heavily on what they came to know and understand about their students through day-to-day classroom interactions. Both drew upon informal observation of students' interactions to make grouping decisions based on what they knew about students' behavior and work ethic. At the same time, for Sue at least, some of the resources associated with school accountability mandates enabled and sharpened such observations. At the same time, this study substantiates the findings of Salmon-Cox (1981) that teachers give more credence to their own observations of classroom performance than to standardized test scores. Sue rejected the SRI as a true measure of students' reading level. Rather, she relied on what she learned about her students' reading performance in one-on-one reading conferences.

Further, the classroom context literature reports that teachers rely heavily upon informal classroom observations of classroom performance when assigning grades. A study by Bol et al. (1998) found that teachers rely on observational data and performance assessment tasks more frequently than traditional assessment to determine grades. This is confirmed by Steve's use of informal observational data that he kept in his head during his economics unit. In addition, teachers place the greatest weight on academic performance and academic enabling behaviors, such as effort, when grading (Mcmillan, Myran & Workman, 2002) even though these behaviors are monitored through informal classroom observations. This study substantiates this claim in light of Sue's inclusion of student effort as part of her grading practices.

*Cultural Literature*

The cultural strand of literature posits that the American school system reinforces and maintains existing social stratification and inequality that is present in American society at large. Scholars and researchers who write from this point of view claim that teachers' taken-for-granted assumptions about race and class shape their assessment practices.

This study contradicts the basic assumption of this strand of literature. The main assumption of this literature is that teachers are not reflective about race and culture and that this is a central cause of student failure. Ms. Mathews' actions at the SIP meeting showed that many school personnel are willing to forthrightly address such assumptions in order to provide better opportunities for all students. Ms. Mathews was aware that some teachers held deficit views about some of their students. She addressed this issue squarely and forced teachers to put such excuses aside in the face of assessment results from other, comparable schools. Further, this study demonstrated the multiple demands teachers faced in trying to improve student learning. It is not fair to blame student failure on teachers' beliefs alone. Disparity in educational background of families, available family and community support networks, and the in- and out-of-school environment, ensures that many children will always struggle to reach the level of performance demanded by NCLB. Government, religious, and social institutions have been unable to erase the presence and the impact of racism and poverty in the lives of children. We cannot expect teachers to counteract social ills over which they have no control.

*Summary*

Overall, this study attempts to move away from the dichotomy of extremes that exists in much of the present literature about mandated testing. On one hand, proponents

claim that accountability testing will improve both the content that is taught and how well it is taught. Opponents fear that such testing deskills teachers and will move their practice away from considering what is developmentally appropriate for students toward teaching only to the test. Each side seems unable to acknowledge any value in the other's view. This study points out that mandated testing is neither all good, nor all bad. Instead, the reality of teachers' lived experience in the age of accountability is more complex and nuanced than clear-cut. How mandates enter classrooms and what happens depends on the decisions that many actors make, including the district and the principal, as well as teachers. As mandates proliferate at different levels of the organization, they can either be overlapping and competing, or they can be coordinated to support each other. In addition, some mandates bring tools that seem to require teachers to march through with no consideration to the needs of students. Other tools seem to facilitate teachers' close attention to students and their work.

Further, this study considers what teachers themselves think about their work and the conditions of their work as an important consideration for research. This study looked at teachers' relationships with other people with whom they work as an important piece of the puzzle of why teachers assess the way they do. Teachers' experiences, as seen through their eyes, and how they feel about them is important. This confirms what other literature on policy implementation (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2006; Spillane, 1996; Coburn, 2001) has found. Policies do not move directly from paper to classrooms. Rather, different actors act upon them at different levels, giving rise to overlaps, duplication and contradictions. In this complex environment, teachers make sense of the

messages they receive about policies based on their personal experience and beliefs, their relationships with others in the school, and their situated practice.

## Questions Raised

Proponents of mandated testing claim that such testing provides teachers with information that helps them understand what their students know and helps them to adjust their teaching to improve student learning. This study showed that mandated assessment did, indeed, impact the instruction of these two teachers. But, key questions remain; did it help them adjust their instruction to improve student learning? And did it help them better understand their students' learning? Though it is problematic to draw definitive implications from the study of two teachers in one school, the study raises questions to be considered both in terms of policy and in terms of teacher education.

### *Policy Questions*

One policy question raised by this study is, in the matter of accountability, is a singular focus on assessment the best way to raise achievement levels of all students. For the teachers in this study, the focus on testing outcomes did not help them design effective instruction. While both Steve and Sue used the content of the assessments to focus the content of their instruction, it did little to help them design effective lessons. Sue had the benefit of the Four Blocks format and the textbook series to help her shape the delivery of her lessons. At the same time, Steve didn't have any feedback about the performance of his students on the sixth grade test. One teacher had the benefit of district and school mandates to shape instruction, while the other didn't have any.

Do we really want teachers to 'teach to the middle' at the expense of students who fall either above or below average? Under NCLB, teachers work to ensure that students reach the mandated AYP scores, but in the end, students who are above or below average lose. High achievers may not be challenged to move beyond average performance, and struggling students might not be given the support they need to reach proficiency. Even though it is the aim of policymakers to raise achievement of all students, in reality, AYP requirements result in teaching that is aimed mostly at students who are in the middle. It is time to look at a program that acknowledges the vast range of abilities teachers need to deal with in their classrooms and support this work. Under NCLB, every child is treated as capable of average proficiency. Individual abilities and knowledge are lost in this constructed vision of students. Children who need more challenging curriculum and children who need more scaffolding and support are left behind. In truth, no child is average. Every child is different, and researchers and policymakers need to design a program that acknowledges that fact.

*Questions for Teacher Educators*

Along with questions for policymakers, the findings from this dissertation raise questions for teacher educators. In particular, how is it that these two teachers have arrived in their classrooms with so little knowledge about how to go about grading their students? The question for both of these teachers is what do grades represent? Do they represent an actual measure of what students have learned in a given period of time? Do they reflect student performance relative to standards? Is the purpose to give feedback to students or parents? Do grades represent progress or effort? The district's report card seems to indicate that the issue is settled for the district, so why is it not settled for Sue?

While Steve has a settled routine that turns student assignments into percentage points, he appears to have little idea of how to measure his students learning on the projects he values. This certainly confirms the beliefs that teachers' lack of assessment literacy as found in the prescriptive literature. More importantly, it suggests that something as fundamental as the meaning of grades and the mechanism for calculating them have yet to be institutionalized. On the one hand, this might be just a reflection of the endemic complexity of teaching. Further, we might not want grading to be so rationalized. Instead, we might want teachers to apply a range of criteria and to do so with the best interest of the child in mind. On the other hand, such clear lack of guidance and rationalization does suggest that the profession, as a whole, has a way to go to develop at least a basic codification of one of the most basic tasks of teaching. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation or my current capacities, and probably most other people's as well, to land upon an answer to these questions. Instead, I argue that teacher educators might best help prospective and in-service teachers think more carefully about grading by engaging them with these very questions. In particular, teachers need to be challenged to consider the limits of informal observation in understanding student learning. Further, they need to be given more tools throughout their pre-service education that will enable them to actually capture and assess student learning through more formal means. Sue seemed to discover through her poetry unit that her students performed better when she built in opportunities to review their work prior to a final product. Steve acknowledged that he should have utilized more formative assessment rather than relying only on summative assessment of the social studies units. Clearly, formative assessment needs to be emphasized as part of pre-service teachers' education, something that policymakers, even

proponents of standardized testing, can support. In the end, though, teachers will remain responsible for sorting through the meaning that assessment holds both for their instructional practices and for their students.

# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A

## First Semester Interviews: Focus Teacher

Initial Interview:

1. What do you see as the strengths of this school?

2. What are some of its challenges? How are these being addressed?

3. Tell me about your teaching experience. (How long, what districts)

4. What sources do you draw on when you are teaching [social studies, reading]? (Courses you have taken, your own background knowledge, district curriculum, textbook, state assessment tests)

5. What are your goals for [social studies, reading]? How did you choose those goals?

6. How do you go about deciding how you will assess your students' learning? Can you tell me about a time when your struggled to figure out how you would assess students? Can you tell me about times when it seemed obvious to you how to assess them?

7. What sources of information do you draw upon when assessing your students? (teacher prep courses, inservice) Who presented? Where from? Collegial instruction?

8. Has your district mandated its own testing for [social studies, reading]? How do you use the information from these tests?

9. What information have you gleaned from previous years' state assessment tests?

10. What use did you make of that information?

Interview #2 (timed to occur soon after parent-teacher conferences after first marking period):

1. What information did you take into account in determining grades for your students in [social studies, reading]? (formal assessment, informal assessment, class participation, homework, projects)

2. How did you weight each of these? What influenced your decision about this? (own beliefs about what is important, district guidelines, other)

3. Was there ever a time when you found it difficult deciding what grade to give a student? What are some other issues that played into your decision?

4. As the marking period progressed, did anything you learned from formal and informal assessments change either the content or the way you taught [social studies, reading] from the way you had intended to teach it?

5. Did the state assessment tests play a part in determining grades?

6. Has anything you have learned so far about your students changed the way you intend to go about teaching [social studies, reading] as the year goes on?

End of First Semester Interview (#3):

1. Can you tell me about a time you grouped your students for instruction? What information was important to inform your decision? Where do you get this information?

2. Can you tell me about a time you found it difficult to group your students? What issues made it difficult?

3. What have you learned so for this school year from your assessment of your students in [social studies, reading]? How will this influence what you plan to teach or re-teach?

4. How do you decide what type of assignment will be best for your teaching goals in [social studies, reading]?

5. Other than formal assessments, what other ways do you find helpful to assess your students' learning?

6. How did the fall state assessment tests impact your planning, instruction, and assessment of [social studies, reading] so far this year?

# APPENDIX B

## Second Semester Interviews: Focus Teacher

Interview #4 (timed to take place at beginning of second semester):

1. Now that you have completed one semester with your class, are there any ways that you have had to adjust your long-term [social studies, reading] goals in response to the specific needs of this class?

2. What information did you take into account in determining your grades for this marking period?

3. Was there an instance this marking period when you had a difficult time deciding what grade to assign to a student? What made it difficult? What did you take into account?

Interview #5 (timed to occur after spring parent-teacher conferences):

1. What information did you communicate to parents concerning the state assessment tests?

2. What questions did parents have about the state assessment tests? Were their questions concerned with the performance of the school as a whole? Their own child's performance? Both?

3. [social studies teacher only] What feedback have you gotten from the sixth grade concerning the performance of your former students on the social studies state assessment test? Was this transmitted through formal means, or was it done informally between teachers?

   [social studies teacher only] What forms of assessment did you use this semester?

4. What do the state assessment test results tell you about your school as a whole?

5. What does it tell you about your own students?

6. Will this information impact your planning, instruction, or assessment next year?

Interview #6 (at the end of the school year):

1. I observed your lesson/s on _____. You chose to assess by _____. What made this assessment a good choice? What did you take into consideration?

2. What did you learn about your students from that assessment?

3. How are new teachers inducted into the learning community in this school? Is there a planned way they are informed about the school's expectations? Is it done more informally, such as the grade level teaching partner passing on information?

4. How was the decision made to departmentalize instruction this year? Was it teacher initiated, or administration initiated? What input did teachers have in determining who would teach which subject and the manner in which class changes, etc., would be handled?

# APPENDIX C

## Non-Focus Teacher Interview Protocol

Interview #1

1. What do you see as the strengths of this school?

2. What are some of its challenges? How are these being addressed?

4. Tell me about your teaching experience. (How long, what districts)

5. What are your goals for [social studies, reading]?

6. What resources do you use to reach those goals?

7. What is the source of those resources? Your teacher prep program, district inservice, texts, other teachers, any other sources?

8. Has the state assessment test impacted or changed the way you teach, what you teach, or the pressure you feel to do well?

Interview #2

5. I observed your lesson/s on _____. You chose to assess by _____. What made this assessment a good choice? What did you take into consideration?

6. What did you learn about your students from that assessment?

7. What do the state assessment results tell you about your school as a whole?

8. What does it tell you about your students?

9. Will this information impact you planning, instruction, or assessment next year?

10. How are new teachers inducted into the learning community in this school? Is there a planned way they are informed about the school's expectations? Is it done more informally, such as the grade level teaching partner passing on information?

# APPENDIX D

## Interview Protocol: Principal

Interview #1(Beginning of school year):

1. What are some of the strengths of this school?
2. What are some of the challenges? How are these being addressed?
3. What are the strengths of your teaching staff?
4. What teachers do you see as leaders? In what way are they leaders?
5. Does this district conduct assessment to monitor students' progress toward state or NCLB goals? If so, what is your role in communicating expectations to your staff?
6. What is your understanding of the state's expectations for your school under the state assessment policy?
7. What is your understanding of the expectations for your school under the NCLB policy?
8. How do you talk to parents about these tests?
9. Do you talk to teachers about assessment practices? If so, is it mostly about tests?
10. Do either state assessment tests or NCLB play a part in student grades in your school or district?
11. Who establishes the manner in which grades are determined?

Interview #2 (End of Year):

1. This school has many programs that support student achievement in reading (Fast ForWord, Lindamood-Bell, etc.). Are these programs being used in other elementary buildings in the district?

2. What grade levels are included in these programs? Are they going to continue next year?

3. Is there a standard criteria for choosing students to participate, or is it up to the teachers' discretion?

4. You have dedicated a lot of your school's budget to the training of your staff for these programs. Do you sense any resistance to this, or do you feel that everyone is on board and using these tools in their teaching.

5. In light of this year's state assessment results, what would you say contributed to the successes?

6. What do you intend to implement as a way of improving any disappointing scores?

# APPENDIX E

## Academic Support Coach Interview Protocol

Interview #1:

1. What is the strength of this school? What is its greatest challenge?

2. Can you tell me about the district state assessment preparation materials? Who prepared these?

3. What was the response of the teachers in this building to the materials, in your estimation?

4. Do you have any sense of why Kensington is more successful, especially as far as state assessment results, as compared to other schools with similar demographics?

Interview #2:

5. In your estimation of Kensingtons's state assessment results, what was the greatest strength it revealed? What was the greatest weakness? How will this be addressed before the next state assessment is administered?

6. This school has many programs to support student achievement. How are students chosen for programs such as Fast ForWord? (test results, lowest in class, student who will benefit most)

7. How are students chosen to participate in the Lindamood-Bell program? (test results, lowest in class, student who will benefit most)

8. In the school's Four Blocks program, the SRI is used to test students. What are the test results used for? How was it decided that that test would be the best? Who decided?

# APPENDIX F

## Follow Up Interview: Focus Teachers Fall 2006

1. What is the arrangement for departmentalization this year in 5th grade?

2. Did you have any input into those decisions?

3. [social studies teacher only] Have you gotten any feedback (whether through formal means or informal social contacts with other teachers) about how your former students performed on the sixth grade social studies state assessment test last fall?

4. [social studies teacher only] Last year you mentioned a social studies committee that had been in existence previously, but didn't meet last year. Have you been reconstituted for this year? Who was on the committee? Were you appointed or did you volunteer?m

5. Are there any new district mandated or building level assessments this year?

6. Can you remember/trace where/when you learned about assessment? (As student, in undergrad elementary classes, in master's level classes, or in Professional Development)

## APPENDIX G

### Follow Up Interview: Principal Fall 2006

1. What changes have you noticed this year because of the redistricting?

2. Is writing the core subject area that is the focus for improvement this year? Are teachers meeting together to score student writing?

3. Your school has implemented various programs that support student achievement in reading—are you using the same programs as last year? (Fast For Word, Lindamood-Bell, etc.). Are there any new programs in place this year?

4. What grade levels are included in these programs?

5. How are students selected to participate in these programs?

6. Last year you told me that you and your staff determined three goals for the school and three personal goals for themselves—how would you say you did at achieving those goals?

# APPENDIX H

## Follow Up Interview: Academic Support Coach

Mary Locke: formerly the academic support coach has changed her position this year. She is currently the third fifth grade teacher.

1. Now that you are back in the classroom, what stands out for you as your challenges?

2. What are some of your successes?

3. How do you see the work you did as academic support coach being used in the school?

4. Are you using that work now that you are a fifth grade teacher?

5. Are there any insights you have now that you are no longer the academic support coach?

6. Now that you are on the other side, how are teachers treating you? What are your relationships with other teachers?

APPENDIX I

Observation Form

Code:

| Subject Matter:<br><br>Instructional Content: | Instructional Methods: |
|---|---|
| Assignment: | Assessment: |

**Australia Packet**
Rubric

**Name:** _____

Page 1: (10 pts.) _____

Page 2: (20 pts.) _____

Page 3: (10 pts.) _____

Page 4: (56 pts.) _____

Full Name: (4 pts.) _____

Total: _____

APPENDIX K

**Student Timeline Poster Assignment**

Name:_____ Start Date: _____

Due Date: _____

**Use the poster paper to create a horizontal Timeline illustration of your life from birth to the present.**

1. Your timeline should have a title. (15 Points)
   (Titles should be decorative, and in color.)

2. You are to include-
   ten events on your timeline. (40 Points)
   (Events should be two sentences long.)

3. Each event you write about should include -
   a visual and date. (20 Points)
   (Dates should be Month, Day and Year, if you can get that accurate.)
   (Visuals can be photos, drawings, or pictures cut from magazines.)

4. Your poster should have a border design. (10 Points)
   (Borders should be in color and show creativity.)

5. Neatness will count. (15 Points)
   (Take your time on this poster -
   Your finished product should show planning and careful work!)

APPENDIX L

## Student Timeline Rubric

**Name:** _____

**Title (in color).....(15 pts.)** _____

**Ten Events –**
**(two sentences long).....(40 pts.)** _____

**Ten Visuals & Dates.....(20 pts.)** _____
**(Drawings, Photos, or Cut Outs)**

**Border Design.....(10 pts.)** _____
**(in color)**

**Neatness.....(15 pts.)** _____

**Total:** _____

APPENDIX M

Teacher's Self-Selected Reading Log

| Key: | |
|---|---|
| **Reads:** | Check appropriate box |
| **Strategies Used:** | Plus(+) uses strategy<br>Minus (-) not using strategy |
| **Comprehension:** | Check appropriate box |
| **Level:** | Check appropriate box |

**Student's Name:**

| | | Reads | | Strategies Used | | | | | Comprehension | | | | Level | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date | Book Title | Fluently | Word by Word | Sounds Words | Context Clues | Syntax Clues | Pictures | Self-Corrects | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor | Too Easy | Appropriate | Too Hard |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Teacher may add comments in blank spaces below checkmarks.

APPENDIX N

Consequences and Support for Title I High Priority Schools

| Phase | Consequences for Title I High Priority Schools | Support for Title I High Priority Schools |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | • Notify parents of School's AYP status<br>• Offer School Choice and Transportation<br>• Write and implement a new School Improvement Plan<br>• 10% of Title I funds must be used for targeted professional development | • Process Mentors visits 4 times/year<br>• School Improvement Framework<br>• Comprehensive Needs Analysis<br>• Aligned curriculum and supports for the curriculum<br>• School Improvement Plan template |
| 2 | • Notify parents of School's AYP status<br>• Offer School Choice and Transportation<br>• Offer Supplemental Educational Services<br>• Implement 2nd year of School Improvement Plan<br>• 10% of Title I funds must be used for targeted professional development | • Process Mentors visits 4 times/year<br>• School receives targeted audit if the only reason they did not make AYP was for Special Education or Limited English Proficiency (LEP) subgroups<br>• School Improvement Framework<br>• Comprehensive Needs Analysis<br>• Aligned curriculum and supports for the curriculum<br>• School Improvement Plan template |
| 3 | • Notify parents of School's AYP status<br>• Offer School Choice and Transportation<br>• Offer Supplemental Educational Services<br>• Write and implement Corrective Action Plan | • Process Mentors visits 4 times/year<br>• School receives Comprehensive Audit<br>• School receives additional funds to support building level initiatives that support their plan<br>• Principal receives Leadership Coach for 100 days<br>• Principal attends Principal Fellowship<br>• School Improvement Framework<br>• Comprehensive Needs Analysis<br>• Aligned curriculum and supports for the curriculum<br>• School Improvement Plan template |
| 4 | • Notify parents of School's AYP status<br>• Offer School Choice and Transportation | • Process Mentors visits 8 times/year<br>• School receives Comprehensive Audit<br>• School receives additional funds to support building |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Offer Supplemental Educational Services<br>• Plan for Restructuring | level initiatives that support their plan<br>• Principal receives Leadership Coach for 100 days<br>• Principal attends Principal Fellowship<br>• School Improvement Framework<br>• Comprehensive Needs Analysis<br>• Aligned curriculum and supports for the curriculum<br>• School Improvement Plan template |
| 5 or higher | • Notify parents of School's AYP status<br>• Offer School Choice and Transportation<br>• Offer Supplemental Educational Services<br>• Implement Restructuring Plan | • Process Mentors visits 4 times/year<br>• School receives Comprehensive Audit<br>• School receives additional funds to support building<br>level initiatives that support their plan<br>• Principal receives Leadership Coach for 100 days<br>• Principal attends Principal Fellowship<br>• School Improvement Framework<br>• Comprehensive Needs Analysis<br>• Aligned curriculum and supports for the curriculum<br>• School Improvement Plan template |

**Auditors:** Auditors are trained educators (often retired principals and superintendents) who collect data on a building. They visit teachers, the school improvement team, and the principal. Data is collected in relation to the research-based school improvement framework to examine the school at that moment to view the school beyond [state assessment] scores.

**Comprehensive Audit:** A comprehensive audit will look at the entire school to collect data with respect to the research-based [State] School Improvement Framework.

**Leadership Coach:** A leadership coach helps the principal strengthen skills and broaden leadership tools.

**Principal Fellowship:** Hosted and developed at [a state university], principals attended a two-week residential fellowship focusing on instructional leadership skills. Content is focused on strengthening instructional leadership.

**Process Mentors:** A team of three people; one representing the district in which the school resides, one representing the ISD, and a third representing the [State Department of Education] trained to assist the school with school improvement planning and implementation, systemic or institutional barriers, and acceptable uses of federal funds.

APPENDIX O

Ms. Mathews' State Assessment Report

**3rd Grade Analysis** (48 students)

**Writing**

| # | Condition Codes |
|---|---|
| 5 | Off Topic/Insufficient |
| 1 | Blank/Refused to Respond |
| 4 | No Connection to the Question |

| # | Comment Codes |
|---|---|
| 4 | Lacks focus on one central idea |
| 11 | Demonstrates limited control over sentence structure, vocabulary and/or conventions |
| 33 | Needs details and examples to adequately develop the ideas and content |
| 10 | Lacks coherent organization and/or connections between ideas |
| 1 | Needs richer development of the central idea with some additional, relevant details and examples to get a higher score |
| 1 | Needs greater precision and maturity of language use to get a higher score |

**Reading**

| # | Comment Codes |
|---|---|
| 1 | Lacks a clear position |
| 3 | Lacks clarity, which causes confusion |
| 15 | Needs examples and details from the reading selections to adequately develop the position |
| 18 | Supports the position with examples and details from only one reading Selection |
| 30 | Does not make a connection across two reading selections |
| 2 | Contains misconceptions about the content of the reading selections |
| 2 | Needs richer support of the position with some additional examples and details from the reading selections |

**4th Grade Analysis** (58 students)

**Writing**

| # | Condition Codes |
|---|---|
| 2 | Off Topic/Insufficient |
| 13 | No Reference to Either Selection |

| # | Comment Codes |
|---|---|
| 4 | Lacks focus on one central idea |
| 21 | Demonstrates limited control over sentence structure, vocabulary and/or |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Conventions |
| 38 | Needs details and examples to adequately develop the ideas and content |
| 9 | Lacks coherent organization and/or connections between ideas |
| 3 | Needs richer development of the central idea with some additional, relevant details and examples to get a higher score |
| 1 | Needs greater precision and maturity of language use to get a higher score |

**Reading**

| # | Comment Codes |
|---|---|
| 2 | Lacks a clear position |
| 3 | Lacks clarity, which causes confusion |
| 25 | Needs examples and details from the reading selections to adequately develop the position |
| 2 | Supports the position with examples and details from only one reading Selection |
| 18 | Does not make a connection across two reading selections |
| 3 | Contains misconceptions about the content of the reading selections |
| 11 | Needs richer support of the position with some additional examples and details from the reading selections |
| 3 | Needs greater precision and mastery of language use |

**5th Grade Analysis** (50 students)

| # | Condition Codes |
|---|---|
| 1 | Off Topic/Insufficient |

| # | Comment Codes |
|---|---|
| 5 | Lacks focus on one central idea |
| 14 | Demonstrates limited control over sentence structure, vocabulary and/or conventions |
| 32 | Needs details and examples to adequately develop the ideas and content |
| 18 | Lacks coherent organization and/or connections between ideas |
| 1 | Needs richer development of the central idea with some additional, relevant details and examples to get a higher score |

**Reading**

| # | Comment Codes |
|---|---|
| 5 | Lacks clarity, which causes confusion |
| 23 | Needs examples and details from the reading selections to adequately develop the position |
| 21 | Does not make a connection across two reading selections |
| 5 | Contains misconceptions about the content of the reading selections |
| 12 | Needs richer support of the position with some additional examples and details from the reading selections |
| 6 | Needs greater precision and mastery of language use |

APPENDIX P

Kensington School [state assessment] Writing Plan

| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Week One: | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Peer Reflection Verbal Response | Cross-text writing Teacher models the complete piece |
| Week Two: | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Peer Reflection Verbal Response | Teacher models cross-text writing, then gives guided practice as students write their restatement and agree or disagree portion. Teacher then models the completion of this writing, with the help of students |
| Week Three: | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Peer Reflection Teacher models written response | Cross-text - No teacher modeling, unless needed. Students write the cross-text piece answering all the questions and/or statements as given in the prompt. |
| Week Four: | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative-- Add Stars & Wishes in the sharing part of writing | Personal Narrative | Peer Reflection Teacher guides students in written response | Cross-text - Model only if students still need this help. Students write the cross-text piece answering all the questions and/or statements as given in the prompt. |
| Week Five: | Personal Narrative--Stars & Wishes insharing | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Peer Reflection<br><br>Student written response | Cross-text - No modeling. Students write the cross-text piece answering all the questions and/or |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | part | | | | statements as given in the prompt. |
| Week Six: | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative-- Add Stars & Wishes in the sharing part of writing | Peer Reflection<br><br>Student written response | Cross-text. No modeling. Students write the cross-text piece answering all the questions and/or statements as given in the prompt. |
| Week Seven: | Personal Narrative | Personal Narrative-- Add Stars & Wishes in the sharing part of writing | Personal Narrative | Peer Reflection<br><br>Student written response | Cross-text. No modeling. Students write the cross-text piece answering all the questions and/or statements as given in the prompt. |

Cross-Text Writing Example:
Released question from Fall 2005--4th Grade state assessment test

> *People can achieve goals when they work together. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer using specific details and examples from* ***both*** *"My Life With Bears" and "Hannah." Be sure to show how the two selections are alike or connected.*

**Yes and restatement of question:** Yes, I agree that people can achieve goals when they work together.
**Specific details and examples for 1st story linking to the question:** In the story "My Life With Bears" many people worked together to learn more about bears. In the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, a study of black bears has been going on for more than 30 years. For this study to be kept up to date, many people worked together to track, measure, and tag the bears.
**Specific details and examples for 2nd story linking to the question:** In the story "Hannah" there were many people who worked together to achieve a goal. Hannah, the blind girl, wanted to be able to read and write, but the special books and materials she needed were too expensive for her family to buy. Many of her friends worked together to help her win a potato-digging contest. The winner received $5.00 and that was enough for Hannah to buy special materials.
**How the two stories are connected or alike:** It is clear that both stories support the idea of people achieving goals when they work together. In "My Life With Bears" with many people working, the goal of knowing the bear population in the Great Smokey Mountains was achieved. In the story "Hannah" many people helped this main character achieve her goal of reading. Both stories support this theme.

APPENDIX Q

Kensington Report Card

| Evaluation Key | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 93 % - 100 % | B- | 80 % - 82 % | D+ | 67 % - 69 % |
| A- | 90 % - 92 % | C+ | 77 % - 79 % | D | 63 % - 66 % |
| B+ | 87 % - 89 % | C | 73 % - 76 % | D- | 60 % - 62 % |
| B | 83 % - 86 % | C- | 70 % - 72 % | E | 0 % - 59 % |

4 Goes beyond the requirements. Shows accuracy, appropriateness, quality and originality.

3 Meets the requirements. Can apply the skill or concept correctly and independently. Shows accuracy, appropriateness, and quality.

2 Shows some understanding. However, errors or misunderstandings still occur. Teacher reminders, hints and suggestions are incorporated with understanding. Quality is not consistent.

1 Cannot complete the task or skill independently. Shows little understanding of the concept or skill. Quality is lacking.

*Note: If blank, not assessed that marking period.*

| | Marking Period | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Lexile Level: | | | | |
| **Reading:** | | | | |
| Comprehends a variety of texts (identifies main idea and supporting details, uses context clues, recognizes author's purpose, and compares/contrasts themes) | | | | |
| Locates and retrieves information from a variety of sources | | | | |
| **English / Writing:** | | | | |
| Utilizes the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing) | | | | |
| Applies correct grammatical and mechanical skills | | | | |
| Applies writing skills in a variety of types of writing, such as narratives, research, poetry, and informational works | | | | |
| Applies writing skills in other subjects | | | | |
| Delivers oral presentations using appropriate speaking techniques | | | | |
| | | | | |
| **Social Studies** | | | | |
| Civic Perspective: Identifies and explains the branches of the American government | | | | |
| Economic Perspective: Analyzes how government decisions on taxation, spending, and regulations impact the U.S. economy | | | | |
| Geographic Perspective: Analyzes and explains how geography influences people, places, and cultures | | | | |
| Historic Perspective: Learns about various significant events and key people/groups in American history | | | | |
| Cultural/Global Perspective: Investigates, identifies, and analyzes consequences of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination | | | | |

**[Reading, English/Writing, and Social Studies are given letter and percentage grades. Applicable standards are given 1, 2, 3, or 4.]

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