

Assessment Competency: How to obtain the right information to improve data-driven instruction

Elizabeth Brooke, Ph.D., CCC-SLP
Chief Education Officer, Lexia Learning and Rosetta Stone

Assessments are an integral part of every teacher's and administrator's professional role, yet many educators have not been trained in the how and why of assessments. This knowledge would allow them to approach assessments with a critical eye of what the purpose of the assessment is and, maybe more importantly, how the data connect back to instruction in the classroom. In many districts, discussions about assessment are often met with resistance; educators feeling the fatigue of frequent assessment and the frustration of not understanding the purpose and goal of the seemingly unending series of testing requirements.

When assessments are properly administered and integrated into instruction, the resulting data can provide valuable information about progress towards instructional goals, success of interventions, and overall curriculum implementation. However, obstacles begin to emerge when the appropriate professional development is not provided and educators are left trying to piece together the story from assessments that may not be designed to tell a cohesive story.

Teachers and administrators must first understand the purpose of four major kinds of assessments related to instructional planning (screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring, outcome), and how the integration of a comprehensive assessment plan will result in more productive use of data to improve instruction, reduce the redundancy of assessments serving the same purpose, foster seamless integration into school schedules and support student progress. This requires a level of assessment competency that is surprisingly lacking in most schools.

A Systematic Lack of Assessment Competency

Despite the integral role assessment plays in classroom instruction, the level of *Assessment Competency* or *Assessment Literacy*—knowledge and experience using assessments and the data effectively—remains very low. In fact, most states do not require explicit training in assessment as part of teacher certification, resulting in a systematic deficit in teacher preparedness. Surveys have confirmed that a critical gap exists in terms of teachers' understanding of the practice, terminology, standards, development, and use of

assessment (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013, Teacher Prep Review). Consequently, educators often lack the essential skills they need to be able to differentiate instruction in their classrooms.

At a fundamental level, many educators have limited knowledge of the scope of the main types of assessments and, more importantly, limited knowledge of how and when to apply them. Without a basic understanding of the goals for each kind of assessment, the process of interpreting and leveraging the data to affect student instruction remains a challenge. Considering the frequency and focus on assessment, the process of assessing student progress can become a stressful and seemingly futile exercise.

Understanding the Goals and Types of Assessments

When thinking about assessment for instructional planning and assessing the outcome of the instruction, there are four main goals that need to be understood: (Torgesen, J. K. (2006) A comprehensive K-3 reading assessment plan: Guidance for school leaders. Portsmouth, NH. RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction)

1. to **identify** students who are “at risk” for reading difficulties. This is an initial screen to determine who might need more intensive instruction in order to have a higher likelihood of reaching grade level standards by the end of the school year. It is critical to have this information at the beginning of the year, but periodic checks throughout the year are also valuable.
2. to **monitor** students’ progress during the year to determine whether students are making adequate progress and identify if any students are not progressing or falling behind. The frequency of monitoring is a reflection of risk; the higher the level of risk, the more frequent the monitoring.
3. to **collect** information about students that will help to provide additional information to a student’s profile of strengths and weaknesses and allow the teacher to target specific areas of need
4. to **assess** whether the instruction provided in a unit or across the year was successful in helping all students meet standards or grade-level expectations

Across the country, there is a significant amount of confusion regarding the many labels used for assessments—interim, benchmark, formative, summative, screener, etc. Rather than the label, the emphasis should be placed on the goal of the assessment (what questions it can answer). There are many assessment options but in the context of classroom planning, there are four main types of assessment that are most commonly applied that correspond to the four goals just discussed:

- **Universal Screening (identify):** Answers the question, “Which of my students are at-risk for difficulty?”

Valid and reliable screening tests can help teachers identify students who are on track as well as those who are at risk, requiring additional student information to be collected (often using a diagnostic tool). Universal screening assessments are typically administered most broadly at the beginning of the school year, and scores help identify the intensity of instruction these students will require.

- **Progress Monitoring (monitor):** Answers the question, “How much progress are my students making?”

Progress monitoring tests are administered periodically (e.g., weekly, monthly, etc.) to determine whether students are making progress; the higher the risk, the more frequent the monitoring. These assessments help teachers identify which students have mastered specific skills and provide some details around the specific skills that students have or have not mastered during that time period.

- **Diagnostic (collect):** Answers the question, “Where do I need to focus intervention?”

Diagnostic tests provide a deeper look at a broader set of skills often with data that is more reliable than quick, informal tools. The information obtained from diagnostic tests can provide information for planning more effective instruction. Because diagnostic tests are often lengthier, they should be given when additional information is needed or there is question of how reliable the results from a screener or progress monitoring tool are in the particular instance. The ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in a diagnostic profile is one important way to help guide interventions for students who are experiencing difficulty or enhance instruction for above-grade-level students.

- **Outcome (assess):** Answers the question, “Have my students learned the material that has been taught?”

Also sometimes known as summative assessments, they are administered at the end of the year or the end of a unit. Outcome assessments measure the extent to which the student has learned the skills or mastered the standards covered throughout the unit or year. These assessments are important because they give administrators and teachers feedback about the overall effectiveness of their curriculum and instruction.

Structuring an Assessment Plan

Before selecting or administering an assessment for a school or district, it is absolutely critical to understand the core objective of the test being administered as well as understand how reliable and valid the results of the assessment are when using them to make decisions. By carefully considering the purpose of each kind of assessment while an overall assessment plan is designed, certain redundancies will become evident, and the school or district may actually be able to reduce the number of assessments being used. When a cohesive assessment plan exists in a school, district, or state, including a professional development portion of the plan, educators can critically examine why they are utilizing specific tests, and they can be more purposeful in their use of the data.

According to the Rhode Island Department of Education & the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, a well-constructed comprehensive assessment system provides continuous, coherent, and high-quality information on student performance that teachers, school leaders, and district and state administrators could use to improve teaching and learning and meet their decision-making needs (Guidance for Developing and Selecting Quality Assessments in the Secondary Classroom, RI DOE, p. 4).

Given the range of assessment tools with various purposes and assessment data with varying levels of validity and reliability, it is important to answer several questions when building an assessment plan, keeping in mind that although many schools may use assessments in a similar manner, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing an assessment plan. Students and learning environments are quite diverse and the best way to develop a comprehensive assessment plan is to think globally about the grades, schools and districts on which sufficient information exists, where there are gaps in information, and where there are potential redundancies. The most effective and comprehensive assessment plans focus less on the labels of assessments and put more emphasis on identifying what information is needed, finding the most appropriate and valid/reliable methods of gathering that information about student progress to make effective instructional decisions.

To have a purpose-driven, data-driven assessment plan and avoid redundancies, it is important to consider the following questions when developing a comprehensive assessment plan:

- What assessments are we using to identify, monitor, collect and assess?

- Are there areas where we have more than one test? If yes, are the data from both/all reliable and valid for the population we are using them with?
- Are they sensitive to growth if they are measuring growth?
- How long does administration take and how often do we give them?
- Are there any on this list that are mandated by the state or district? Do we know this is still true? (Often times assessments are no longer required when an initiative ends.)
- Which skills am I trying to measure and who else is trying to accomplish the same task?
- Is the assessment data easily understood by teachers and administrators?

A common tendency when implementing an assessment plan is to focus immediate attention on the associated logistics and scheduling of the test administration. However, by focusing first on the assessment objectives and how to achieve them, educators can avoid redundancies and structure an assessment plan resulting in less frustration and greater teacher effectiveness.

Achieving the Benefits of Assessment Competency

Assessment Competency entails not only a clear and purposeful understanding of assessment, but also a strategic connection to classroom instruction. The underlying goal is to gain enough information about student progress to make effective instructional decisions while minimizing the time spent administering assessments and thereby reducing the stress and anxiety associated with the process (Torgesen, 2006, p. 3).

Educators will be more successful when they shift their mindset from “What assessment should I use” to “What information do I need?” Guided by the strong understanding of the four key objectives of assessment—identify, monitor, collect, and assess—teachers and administrators can integrate the right types of assessments to support instructional planning and develop a rigorous and comprehensive assessment plan.

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