
***Chapter 3: Assessment and Learning in the
Multilevel Classroom***

CHAPTER 3: ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING IN THE MULTILEVEL CLASSROOM

Best Practices in Classroom Assessment

Throughout this resource, *assessment* and *learning* are synonymous. Each chapter reflects the ongoing assessment responsibilities of all partners in the multilevel learning community. This chapter describes the beliefs or premises of classroom assessment as they support learning and inform teaching in the multilevel classroom.

Successful multilevel classrooms demonstrate best practices in assessment that include

- targeting student learning outcomes
- using a variety of assessment methods and tools
- differentiating assessment for developmental and cultural appropriateness
- assessing students performing authentic tasks
- involving students in reflecting on and assessing their own learning
- setting and revising learning goals

Classroom-Based Observation

Assessment is an ongoing process of learning and teaching throughout each day in the classroom; it is not an add-on. Observation is the primary assessment method, and immediate descriptive feedback is essential to improving student learning in the multilevel classroom.

Because each classroom forms its own culture, teachers play a powerful role as observers, and their professional judgement is valued and integral to quality classroom observation. Observation provides teachers in multilevel classrooms with an effective and efficient way to explore their students' thinking. Teachers learn about their students' strengths and areas in need of support and development, across multiple curricula and over two or more years. Furthermore, classroom observation is valid and reliable when teachers are guided by targeted learning outcomes and clear criteria, observe a variety of authentic performance tasks, and monitor ongoing learning over time.

Quality classroom observation is dependent upon

- achievable learners' goals
- targeted learning outcomes
- clear criteria
- a variety of authentic learning and teaching contexts
- insightful, systematic monitoring of what teachers see and hear

In multilevel classrooms, purposeful assessment is necessary for managing instructional time and multiple curricula. Thus, teachers *plan with the end in mind*, targeting a manageable number of learning outcomes that may be observable during instruction, practice, engagement in a process, or a performance task. It is not intended that learning outcomes be assessed in isolation, but in the context of real learning and performances that demonstrate understanding. Multilevel classroom teachers may use the basic organizing structure of the curricula, or the larger ideas such as general learning outcomes, strands, clusters, or competencies, before focusing on specific learning outcomes. In mathematics, for example, teachers may think of the specific learning outcomes as the final performance task, but begin observation by focusing on the strands to guide formative assessment. In this way, teachers are observing students at various levels of development, and taking them from where they are towards the end-of-year learning outcomes. Specific learning outcomes or grades are benchmarks that guide assessment for reporting and evaluation.

Differentiating Assessment

Assessment in multilevel classrooms is naturally differentiated because of the wide range of learners' needs and multiple curricula. Teachers observe a few students each day, focusing only on a manageable number of learning outcomes to determine prior knowledge, understanding of new concepts, or the level of performance. Thus, on a given day, a multilevel classroom teacher may collect observable data (what is seen and heard) on two or three students during a read-aloud, during a mathematics workshop, and during reflection time to determine students' understanding of inquiry in a social studies-based theme or unit. (See BLM 5: Focused Observation Form.)

Differentiating assessment is also dependent upon where a student is on a continuum of learning and within the Model of Explicit Instruction (see Chapter 2). When assessing students' understanding of the inquiry process, for example, the multilevel classroom teacher would need to find out and monitor the nature and degree of *scaffolding* that students require to be successful in independent inquiry, or determine each student's level of independence (beginning, with guidance, or independent). Accordingly, teachers focus their daily observations on a few students to determine what they can do, where they are on a continuum of learning, and what instruction will be necessary to develop knowledge, strategies and skills, and attitudes for success.

In addition to making observations, teachers augment their repertoire of assessment methods with conferences, performances and/or products, written tasks, and short quizzes that usually become embedded in instruction or part of the workshop (see Chapter 4). Whatever assessment methods teachers use, they must ask, "Why am I assessing this?"

Formative and Summative Assessment

Teachers in multilevel classrooms require a clear understanding of formative assessment and summative assessment, which have two distinct purposes in classroom assessment.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is foundational to the multilevel classroom. Its purpose is primarily to inform instruction and to provide learners with timely and descriptive feedback. Close, ongoing observation informs teachers' daily decisions about instruction for the whole class, about the formation of flexible and cooperative groups, and about individual learning needs. General learning outcomes or essential questions (that is, the big ideas in curricula) guide formative assessment as teachers plan with the end in mind, and guide the learners through processes towards culminating performances, demonstrations, or products. Keeping in mind that several specific learning outcomes encompass a culminating performance or product, teachers will target only two or three specific learning outcomes at one time, depending upon learners' needs and goals. Focused observation on a few learning outcomes provides teachers with a way of managing the assessment of a wide range of learners across multiple curricula. (See BLM 5: Focused Observation Form.)

Because the classroom is based on continuous progress, and because the whole class does not move along the continuum of learning at the same rate, teachers make judgements many times each day about how they can best support students in progressing to work of greater complexity, abstraction, and independence. Teachers assess what learners can do on a journey towards the targeted end-of-year learning outcomes. Targeted learning outcomes also assist teachers in guiding students as they develop criteria that evolve with new learning; student-generated criteria guide learners on their journey towards achieving specific learning outcomes. In this respect, assessment is an essential part of instruction. (For more information on constructing student-generated criteria, see BLM 2.)

Teachers need to have a clear understanding of what learning looks like and of the curricular expectations.

Teachers look for evidence of learning when they

- check for understanding as a whole-class experience proceeds so that groups can be formed for further practice, strategic instruction, or independent inquiry
- closely observe students working individually and in small groups
- confer with individual students to assess students' progress and needs
- provide descriptive feedback to guide learning
- facilitate reflection at closure of a learning experience

Formative assessment is integral to learning, too. The greatest impact upon students' learning happens through the ongoing descriptive feedback from teachers as they observe what they see and hear, through peer assessment, and through students' own self-assessment and reflections. Students' learning goals are the steps they take along developmental continua as they gain independent learning skills in the multilevel classroom. Formative assessment empowers students and helps them develop confidence in their own unique learning capabilities. Clearly, teachers who use formative assessment in their classrooms make a positive difference to the quality of learning.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is usually a task(s) performed at the end of a theme, unit, semester, term, or school year to demonstrate evidence of learning and to communicate learning to all partners in the learning community. The performance of each student is compared to end-of-year learning outcomes for his or her grade and reported to parents. Summative assessment also includes a synthesis of teachers' observations and students' self-assessments or reflections (formative assessments) to create a thorough description of what the learners know and can do.

Because of the wide range of skills and abilities in the multilevel classroom, however, use of an activation strategy during inquiry may serve as a formative assessment for some students and a summative assessment for others. During activation, multilevel classroom teachers will notice that some students may move directly to independent inquiry; they have met the specific learning outcomes, and teachers will guide them towards more challenging expectations for summative assessment(s) that may even be beyond their "grade" level.

Forms of summative assessment that work well in multilevel classrooms include performances, portfolios, developmental continua, student-led conferences, and action plans. (For more information, see Appendix A: Assessment and Evaluation in the Multilevel Classroom.)

Conscientious record keeping of formative assessments provides a wealth of data at reporting periods, and assists in making summative assessments authentic and relevant for students and parents.

Monitoring Classroom Assessment

In planning for assessment, a starting point may be to practise focused observation (see BLM 5) and informal or “over-the-shoulder” conferences. Teachers may then want to introduce portfolios because it is the learner’s responsibility to maintain evidence of progress on learning goals.

Teachers in multilevel classrooms use the same range of formative and summative assessment methods and tools as teachers in single-grade classrooms. It is imperative that monitoring student learning and maintaining observational records be kept simple and time efficient, yet provide useful documentation of what students know and can do in order to inform instruction. Although technology can be helpful in tracking student learning, use of a clipboard and a nearly blank observation form is often the most effective and efficient means of record keeping. It is helpful to plan when, for whom, and what assessment methods will be used over each day, month, or year (see BLM 4: Assessment Plan: Year-at-a-Glance).

Keeping assessment manageable is essential in the multilevel classroom. Many blackline masters and suggestions for criteria are available in Manitoba’s curriculum documents. Teachers may examine and adapt them to meet the needs of their students. In the multilevel classroom, teachers may begin by choosing only two or three observable criteria at one time to focus their observations.

Record-Keeping Tools and Methods

- **Record-keeping materials:**
 - a clipboard
 - self-adhesive notes
 - a binder
 - dividers (one for each student, plus three or four extras)
- **Recording forms:**
 - Assessment Plan (see BLM 4)
 - Daily Observation Form (laminated) (see BLM 6)
 - Daily Observation Forms (one for each student) (see BLM 6)
 - Focused Observation Form (one for each theme, unit, performance, and so on) (see BLM 5)
- **Clipboard contents:**
 - Daily Observation Form (laminated)
 - Focused Observation Forms (one or two, depending on current classroom theme, unit of study, and so on)
- **Binder contents:**
 - Assessment Plan
 - a section for each student, with one Daily Observation Form for each student
 - a section for Focused Observation Forms as they are completed
 - a section for blank recording forms or templates
 - other sections (as applicable)
- **Binder maintenance:**
 - Transfer self-adhesive notes from the clipboard to each student’s record monthly or at the end of a semester or term.
 - Add Focused Observation Forms when completed.
 - Add any other pertinent information that will assist with formative and summative assessments.

Assessment As a Shared Responsibility

Assessment literacy is "...understanding the principles of sound research-based assessment" (Stiggins 107). In the multilevel learning community, one hears:

- "I can..."
- "This is quality work because..."
- "How can I help you with your learning goal..."
- "The evidence of my learning is..."
- "My reflections are..."
- "Your thinking shows..."

With experience, teachers will develop and manage assessment strategies and record keeping at their own level of comfort. Teachers will learn, with practice, to use a variety of methods in a variety of contexts to ensure valid and reliable assessment information/data.

Students must also learn to monitor their own learning growth. This is part of the shared responsibility of the assessment process in the multilevel classroom. Setting goals, creating action plans, and generating criteria are methods that enable students to assess the quality of their work. When students are responsible for monitoring their own learning, the teacher has less marking and record keeping to do, and students are learning valuable lifelong skills and habits. Students can monitor their own growth along a developmental continuum, maintain a log of reading or process steps, reflect on their learning, and keep a portfolio showing the evidence of their learning. Students who have learned to be competent self-assessors will also be competent peer assessors. Empowering students to be active participants in the learning and teaching process nurtures confidence and the love of learning.

As the learning community involves students, teachers, and parents, assessment is often viewed as a shared responsibility. In order for assessment to be a shared responsibility, however, all partners must clearly understand the criteria by which a quality process, performance, demonstration, or product is to be assessed. (For more information on constructing student-generated criteria, see BLM 2.) When students, educators, and parents are actively engaged in assessment, the learning community has the potential to develop a common understanding of the classroom assessment and evaluation process.

To develop a common understanding of learning, learning improvement, and quality of learning, the learning community must be led by teachers and administrators who have a clear, research-based understanding of classroom assessment. Some means of engaging all partners in the assessment and evaluation process are: developmental continua, student-generated criteria for processes, performances, demonstrations, or products, portfolios, goal setting with parents at student led-conferences, and classroom celebrations of learning. Such a learning and teaching context fosters a common understanding and *assessment literacy* within the learning community.

Reporting Student Progress and Achievement

Developmental continua are assessment tools describing observable behaviours (knowledge, skills and strategies, and attitudes) during authentic processes and/or performances. Continua profile student growth and achievement over time. They can be used by students, teachers, and parents to see what learning looks like, to determine next steps or learning goals, and to report student progress and achievement.

Parents may feel lost without the usual context of grade divisions, and need clear information in report card periods about whether their daughter or son is on course to attain the specific learning outcomes by the end of the school year. Within the context of a multilevel class, grade levels, which are based on end-of-year learning outcomes, are like benchmarks. Comparing student progress to criteria based on the end-of-year learning outcomes, or benchmarks, informs teachers and parents where students are in relation to grade-specific expectations and provincial standards.

Reporting is best accomplished through developmental continua. Use of developmental continua can be time saving for teachers, as they are tools for recording formative assessment data, which may also become a component of the students' report card for summative assessment. Older students can be responsible for monitoring their own progress on continua, which again can save teachers much valuable time. Teachers or students can highlight skills attained and concepts mastered, and can refer to the evidence of learning in students' portfolios or learner profiles to illustrate and explain the continua. Teachers and parents need to be aware that not all students learn in exactly the same sequence or at the same rate, but that the continua track learning over time.

In Manitoba, at the end of a semester or school year, reporting the performance or achievement of students from Grade 6 through Senior 4 is to be expressed in marks as well as in narrative or anecdotal comments. Research is clear that marks should be avoided until summative assessment occurs at the end of a semester or school year so that students have had full opportunities to learn content and develop skills and strategies. Using student-generated criteria to assess quality work provides students and parents with a clearer picture of what the student knows and can do, and enables them to set appropriate goals for future learning, as well as constantly raising expectations. The criteria offer students and their parents descriptive feedback for report cards. These same criteria should be used to develop quantitative rubrics for marks when percentages are required on report cards from Grade 6 to Senior 4.

A *standards test* is an evaluation based on end-of-year learning outcomes and grade-level standards. When standards tests are written in multilevel classrooms, teachers may prepare a teacher-made test so that all students are engaged in the same sort of activity. For example, if the Grade 6 students write an English Language Arts Standards Test, the other students may also experience a "test" or attend to another task that accommodates a test-writing environment for the "Grade 6" students.

Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning is based on quality classroom observation. In the multilevel classroom, learning is best described along developmental continua so that all partners in the learning community have a clear understanding of what the learner knows and can do. Developmental continua also show each partner in the multilevel community what the next steps in the learning process will be, which facilitates goal setting and planning for new learning.

When teachers use developmental continua to engage students and parents in assessment for learning, teachers have more time and more information for supporting student success. Quality classroom observation is a skill that teachers acquire with practice, and it is the most effective way to improve student learning and achievement.

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