The Achievement Gap

Beginning in the late 70s, researches emphasized the need for educational equity and excellence to reduce the effects of socioeconomic status as a predictor of achievement. One of the groups established to contend with this challenge was the Equity and Excellence Consortium, founded at the University of Washington. Two questions used to guide the work of the Consortium have included 1) How do educators promote both equity and excellence? and, 2) How do educators communicate high learning standards for all students, while simultaneously accounting for different levels of readiness?

Since these initial efforts, along with significant amounts of research data compiled by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the achievement gap persists. It appears that reforms over the last few decades have not led the hoped for outcomes. The achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students continues to be the norm rather than the exception.

Another set of challenges associated with the achievement gap are the numerous reforms deployed to close it. Two current examples include Common Core State Standards and Teacher Principal Evaluation Pilot. Many educators believe that these reforms are needed, and still others see these changes as an opportunity to engage students with subject matter in more meaningful ways, and at deeper levels. Nevertheless, the argument could be made that change is occurring in discrete initiatives producing results that are somewhat fragmentary. One way to think holistically about these changes is by focusing on student outcomes as schools reconcile various reform efforts.

Activities outlined in professional learning communities (PLCs) provide an effective place to begin an examination of how educators can unify their work, with student outcomes at the center. The PLC model presented by DuFour, Eacker, and DuFour (2005) shifts the focus to collaboration around student work, to answer some fundamental questions about teaching and learning, including

What do we want all students to know and be able to do?
How will we know if they know or can do it?
What will we do when they know or can do it?
What will we do if they do not know or cannot do it?

In classrooms that have closed the achievement gap, it appears that not only can educators answer these questions, but more importantly, systems have been established to ensure that students can articulate the answers. However, ensuring a cohesive system requires some understanding of the importance of each question and its place in the landscape of education reform.

Madeline Hunter was one of the first authors to consider the question of what do we want all students to learn, through her model of Instructional Theory into Practice, which emphasized the learning objective. Another benchmark work with regard to objectives was the meta-analysis conducted by Marzano (2006) demonstrating the efficacy of learning goals, which has facilitated some changes we observe in classrooms even today. For example, it is accepted practice to see learning objectives posted for student self-evaluation. The latest development with this practice is to see it on observation protocols for administrative walk-throughs. While clarifying the objective is an important first step for teachers and students, implementation has been partial producing a surface or first order change rather than the deeper second order change that educators and reforms are seeking.

Nevertheless, there is growing research to show that practices such as self-reflection predicated on a clear goals have a positive effect on learning. For example, Bransford et al. (2000) discuss how humans need to know the meaning of things; the why behind what we are doing and this suggests using goals, objectives, and targets to focus lessons and learning activities. After establishing the objective, self-assessment follows, which has been shown to increase capacity for metacognitive thinking, and personal connection to subject matter (Diamond & Hopson, 1998). Self-assessment, sometimes called self-regulated or metacognitive learning, also leads to enhanced engagement and academic performance, especially for students in need of additional support (Boykin...
& Noguera, 2011). Moss and Brookhart (2009) summarize the relationship between objective and self-assessment by stating that students who have a clear picture of the learning target and the performance criteria are likely to take needed steps to ensure their work measures up to expectations.

Few doubt the logic behind aligning objectives with the activity of self-assessment, but compelling arguments have been made to think more broadly about learning outcomes and the cultivation of metacognitive thinking. For example, Ellis (2010) suggests transforming objectives with self-assessment into reflective assessments, such as writing “I Learned” statements for promoting student ownership of new knowledge and skills. Deploying reflective assessments links students to personal meaning and enables them to practice self-feedback. Some additional prompts for writing reflective assessments include “I feel…” “I think…” “I know”… “It isn’t yet clear…..” Teachers deploying these kinds of prompts in the form of Entrance or Exit slips gather useful feedback information for making instructional decisions for individuals, small groups, and the entire class.

Another approach for summarizing learning with respect to the objective, while tapping metacognitive thinking, is a target sheet. A target sheet addresses what students need to learn, but also ensures that learning activities are connected to a comprehensible goal. Additional levels of organization may be accomplished by separating targets into units or quarters for communicating the big picture. Effective use of a target sheet includes students tracking their own progress, perhaps by using graphs or visual surveys, such as those shown in the Figures 1, 2 and 3. Self-tracking using visual methods serves as an efficient approach for communicating formative assessment information to the teacher as well.

A variation of the theme of reflective self-assessment is the backwards planning model proposed by Wiggins & McTighe (1998). As these authors suggest, the learning target can be taken to a deeper level by having students pose it as an essential question. Some essential questions for different subjects include Why grammar? What would life be like today if we had lost WWII? What if the Wenatchee and Columbia rivers had run dry during the night? How have mathematical concepts led to the development of cell phones? Essential questions are inherently more interesting than stated objectives, and they invite engagement because questions are posed for the purpose of articulating an answer. In addition, questions are no less amenable to communicating state or national standards and in this way satisfy the first PLC question, what students should learn.

Whether essential question or stated objectives, attending to the standards and engaging students in self-assessment requires diligence. One approach for those still acclimating to standard-based teaching and learning, and wanting accountability to incorporate the practices under discussion, may benefit by assigning one student as the “Target Master.” As the name suggests, this student is put in charge of making sure the class stays focused on the learning target at the beginning, middle, and end of the lesson. The Target Master also reminds everyone to reflect on the target by interpreting its meaning, importance, and their progress toward meeting it.

The corollary of providing students with a clear objective is ensuring they comprehend desired performance for meeting the objective. We have everyday experience with this concept, which makes it easy to apply in the classroom. For example, many students know exactly what it looks like to make that three-point shot during a basketball game or what is required to advance to the next level in the latest video game. Communicating expectations in a discipline means presenting students with criteria and models using rubrics, checklists, exemplars, and other artifacts that close the gap between current and desired performance. However, showing and telling is insufficient. Students need to take the next step by describing for themselves how a performance meets or exceeds expectations.

Objectives, evaluation criteria, and self-assessment are necessary components, but a learner’s sense of self-efficacy tends to mediate, and
sometimes usurp, all of these. One way to think about self-efficacy is through the lens of mindset. Dweck (2006) suggests that mindset determines self-image, intellectual risk-taking, and initiative. But, more importantly, Dweck found that mindset can be altered with guidance in certain kinds of environments. For example, providing feedback in the form of grades may cause a student to adopt a fixed mindset, with internal messages of “I can’t do math and no one in my family goes to college.” Alternatively, providing feedback that enables students to revise work, bringing it into alignment with evaluation criteria, promotes positive mindset. An example of the effect of using feedback for revision is perhaps observed in writing scores from students in Washington State, where the gap between high and low achievement is closing (OSPI Report Card).

Effective writing teachers focus on process so students routinely engage in revision, both collaboratively and independently, predicated on feedback cycles that show students what to do to improve. The system used for writing instruction may be readily transferred to every other discipline but one key is creating a system where students are monitoring their own growth and progress toward standards.

While Dweck (2006) provides empirical evidence to show that self-assessment coupled with process feedback produces results, many educators have anecdotal experiences suggesting the same. For example, we have heard many students say, “It keeps you going when you see you have grown. It makes you proud and you feel like, I can do it!” To illustrate this point further, one student who qualified for both ELL and Special Education support was caught doing a celebration dance after charting his growth from the fall to winter. For comparison, his fall reading benchmark showed 38% accuracy but his winter benchmark showed growth to 59% accuracy. There are many students who would not celebrate after earning 50% on anything, but because the focus was on process and growth, this student had reason to celebrate. He left school that day believing he had potential and that his hard work was paying off. The seeds of a positive mindset had been planted.

Once students have target sheets for operationalizing the learning targets and their day-to-day work is linked with those targets, charting and monitoring becomes a daily practice. It can help develop growth mindsets in a schooling culture that inspires learners to take on rigorous intellectual challenges. Students who can answer the first two PLC questions build self-confidence about tasks and learn that it is effort and practice that lead to skill, knowledge, and academic success rather than simply being born with the “right stuff.”

The next step, after clarifying objectives and initiating self-assessment strategies, is to take action when students perform below or above the desired level of performance. Responding to feedback is one strategy for contending with the question of what comes next by enabling teachers and students to focus taking steps for remediation. One source of feedback comes from assessments, which can also be tracked by students. Indeed, as Stiggins (1997) has stated, “engaging in self-assessment prior to receiving feedback… shifts the primary responsibility for improving the work to the student, where it belongs.” This is certainly the case with practice assignments as well as assessments. Stiggins goes on to make the case that the process of feedback and assessment should be seamless and for improving learning: “we must assess accurately and use results effectively in order to make sure students react productively to the assessment results” (2004). One key to this approach is to have students respond to assessment results, not by doing the next assignment, but by engaging in further investigation, remediating gaps in performance, or accessing resources fixing-up their work. The seminal work by Black and Wiliam (1998) supports all of these conclusions. However, the path to realizing gains from effective feedback, coupled with assessment for learning and productive student response is difficult to achieve.

Nevertheless, taking some small steps to implement a system of seamless assessment envisioned by Stiggins (1997) and Black and Wiliam (1998) are readily available to educators. For example, Hattie (2009) summarizes results from numerous meta-analytic studies and provides a host of instructional practices that deepen our understanding of effective practices, not the least of which is feedback. According to Hattie (2009), feedback was most powerful when it engages students in answering questions about their own gaps in performance, where do I have errors, what are my misconceptions, why am I not more engaged in this unit?

If compelling research from Hattie (2009) is not enough, there are major reform efforts that are sure to inspire every educator, regardless of context or experience. For example, teacher evaluation frameworks from Marzano, CEL and Danielson, along with AWSP Leadership Criteria provide another clear set of objectives and descriptions of performance. Indeed, rubrics found in these frameworks describe many of the instructional practices and processes we strive to use with our own students. It is also helpful and inspiring that performance for teachers and principals be organized around essential PLC questions.

With regard to clear learning goals and promotion of self-assessment, CEL 5D indicates “the success criteria for the learning target(s) are clear to students… the performance tasks align to the success criteria… students refer to success criteria and use them for improvement” (Distinguished performance for standard P5). Similarly, the Marzano framework indicates that, “the teacher identifies important academic vocabulary specific to the lesson and makes students aware of the meaning of these terms… the teacher monitors the extent to which students have internalized the meaning of these terms using their own background knowledge” (Proficient performance for standard 2.5). Lastly, AWSP Leadership Criteria indicates that the principal is “proficient AND consistently demonstrates leadership in the practice of developing comprehensive student growth plans… regularly meets with faculty members to reflect on student growth… and assessment results of selected teachers show consistent academic growth of students” (Distinguished performance for standard 5.2).

By establishing systemic practices in which students answer the four PLC questions, we believe the achievement gap can be closed as well as help educators realize significant gains by embracing education reform, specifically new evaluation models. Additionally, the above strategies embed higher levels of transparency for all stakeholders throughout the instructional process from primary grades to the senior year. Families are not only given a clear mental model of what it looks like for their child to be meeting and exceeding standards but also accurate feedback on where the child is in relation to meeting the standards. Parents and students become valued as instructional partners. What would it look like if students, parents, and teachers could articulate the standard and where the student is in relation to meeting the standard? How might conferences look? How might making decisions about a student’s IEP plan look? How might daily instruction look? Perhaps the evidence of effectiveness would be
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