

# Assessment FOR Learning in Upper Elementary Grades



Students learn more when they use assessments to evaluate their own learning and they have greater feelings of efficacy about their academic abilities.

By Rick Stiggins

**A**s learners ascend to the upper elementary grades, the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience begin to accumulate and impinge on them in ways that can be helpful or harmful. Those effects can turn students into productive, data-based, instructional decision makers acting in their own best interest or counterproductive decision makers acting in ways that harm their academic success. From the time students arrive in school, they are interpreting their own assessment results and drawing inferences about themselves as learners that affect their learning well before their teachers get to act on those results. Those who see themselves succeeding early on begin to believe in themselves as able learners and behave accordingly. A self-fulfilling prophesy begins to play out that turns success into confidence, which gives the student the inner reserves needed to take the risk of trying with enthusiasm for the next learning. That next success pumps up the confidence bubble, which triggers more vigorous trying and more success. And so the cycle con-

tinues, with success feeding on success. The result is a student with a strong sense of academic self-efficacy.

Unfortunately, the cycle can also go in the other direction. As learners ascend to the upper elementary grades, if they experience an accumulation of unsuccessful experiences, they can begin to infer that they are incapable of learning. As doubt builds, here too, it begins to feed on itself, and another self-fulfilling prophesy begins to play out. Students begin to use their own assessment results to ask, “Can I learn this, or is it too hard for me?” “Is this learning worth the energy that I’m going to have to invest to get it?” or “Is trying to learn this worth the risk that I might fail . . . again . . . in public?” If students come down on the wrong side of these questions based on their own sense of their academic record, then it robs them of academic self-efficacy and leaves them with little hope for school success.

My point is that these developments in the mind of the elementary student don’t unfold overnight. Rather, they collect over time as children accumulate experiences. A critical time in that progression for some students can be the upper elementary grades, when they begin to define themselves in relation to school. By then, they may have gathered enough evidence to form a clear sense of themselves as learners, and they may begin to act on it.

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## BUILD SELF-EFFICACY

In her book, *Confidence*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter tells us that “failure or success are not episodes, they are trajectories. They are tendencies, directions, pathways” (2006, p. 9). As we strive to help upper elementary students discover the way to confidence and success, we can learn from Albert Bandura through his definition of the continuum of self-efficacy:

A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered, rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills, which are acquirable. They approach threatening situations with assurance that they can exercise control over them. Such an efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability. . . .

In contrast, people who doubt their capabilities shy away from difficult tasks, which they view as personal threats. They have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes, rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks. Because they view insufficient performance as deficient aptitude, it does not require much failure for them to lose faith in their capabilities. (1994, p. 71)

The questions we must ask ourselves are these: What can educators do to be sure students interpret



*“I couldn’t do my homework because I was working on my blog.”*

their own assessment results in a manner that leads them to infer that learning success is within reach if they keep trying? How can we ensure that the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience for upper elementary students leaves them willing to risk trying? How can we keep them from giving up on themselves so early in their academic lives?

The surprising and very exciting answers, as it turns out, come from the realm of classroom assessment and the manner in which teachers manage this facet of instruction. The answers arise from an understanding of the concept of “assessment *for* learning” (Chappuis, in press). We help students build a strong sense of academic self-efficacy when we help them understand that they have a new role in the assessment environment; that is, we want them to strive to understand what success

looks like from the very beginning of the learning. Then, we want to show them how to use each assessment to determine how to do better the next time. Assessments become far more than merely one-time events attached onto the end of the teaching. They become part of the learning process by keeping students posted on their progress and confident enough to continue striving.

Students become partners in the self-assessment process during the learning by, for example, collaborating with teachers in creating and using assessments like those they will be held accountable for later. This reveals to them the secrets to their own learning success while they are still learning. They can become partners in the accumulation of growth portfolios that reveal to them, their teachers, and their families changes in their own achievement as it is happening. This builds confidence that ultimate success is always within reach. Finally, students can become partners in communicating about their own learning success as they rely on concrete evidence from their portfolios presented in student-led conferences to inform their families of their learning.

## ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

Chappuis (in press) teaches teachers specific assessment *for* learning strategies to rely on during the teaching and learning to set up students for confidence and success. The first two help students under-

stand what good work looks like from the beginning of the learning; that is, where we want them to be when they have learned:

- Start instruction by sharing a vision of the learning target that students can understand — a version written in student-friendly language, for example.
- Accompany this with actual samples of student work that reveal to students the continuum along which they will travel on their journey to success.

The next two strategies help students know where they are now in relation to where we want them to be when they have succeeded:

- Provide learners with continuous access to descriptive feedback that helps them understand how to do better the next time (and then, of course, make sure there is a next time).
- Teach students how to generate their own descriptive feedback through the process of self-assessment.

And the final strategies help students learn to close the gap between where they are now and where teachers want them to be:

- Help students learn to improve the quality of their work one key attribute at a time, always realizing that, ultimately, they must assemble all the pieces into quality work.
- Help students learn to reflect on and remain in touch with changes in the quality of their work and improvements in their own academic capabilities.

Nowhere are these kinds of strategies more important than in upper elementary grades, because this is when the foundations of one's sense of oneself as a learner often become solidified.

When students and teachers become partners in the classroom assessment process, both working in the service of student success, research from around the world reveals that the result is profound achievement gains for all students, with the largest gains accruing for low achievers (Black and William 1998; Hattie and Timperley 2007).

As we think about classroom assessment in the upper elementary grades, it is important to break free of some mistaken beliefs that can prevent using assessment *for* learning. One such outmoded belief is that the path to school effectiveness is paved with annual

or interim standardized tests. Rather, classroom assessment is the one level of application that has proven its worth in improving student learning. Another belief is that the most important purpose of classroom assessment is to determine report card grades. It is the use of assessment to support learning — while the learning is happening — that has proven its worth in promoting school success. Yet another outdated belief is that assessment is something adults do to students in school. While we do assess, students assess themselves too — all the time and right from day one. And they make crucial data-based decisions too. We serve them well when we set them up to make productive decisions.

The final, and perhaps most important, mistaken belief is that teachers know how to use assessment to support learning. It remains the case today, as it has for decades, that teachers come into the profession with little or no preservice preparation in assessment, let alone assessment *for* learning. The same is true of new school administrators. As a result, as we think about the future of assessment in the upper elementary grades, we must plan for effective ongoing professional development around the key aspect of teaching and learning (Stiggins et al. 2006). **K**

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