

How Can Community, Students, and Parents Assess Competency?



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Only with strong support and understanding can new approaches in assessing competency be successful.

IN THE early 1900's a young Andy Gagnon trudged home from school in White River, Ontario, Canada. This is Lake Superior country where the thermometer can dip mighty low, low enough to break it! On this particular afternoon Andy entered the family home holding his right hand. It was only a matter of seconds before the lad told his mother what had happened to him.

His teacher taught penmanship using the assumption that it was important for "all" children to learn how to write right-handed. Andy was ambidextrous. He could shoot the hockey puck on the pond in back of his home equally well with his right or left hand. During the daily penmanship lesson he had switched his pencil as normally from his right hand to his left hand as he would have the hockey stick while gliding down the ice. He knew his teacher wanted him to write only with his right hand, but he forgot and switched.

In this process, his right hand gripped the side of the desk. The right thumb rested squarely on the desk in this position. As the teacher moved around the room checking the students' work, she observed Andy writing left-handed. She brought a wooden pointer down on that right thumb, the force of the blow splitting the nail from top to bottom.

The boy didn't complain when he told his experience to his parents. He had been taught to respect the teacher's authority. In fact he assured his parents that he had apologized to the teacher and promised not to do it again. He had also been taught that if he did complain about the teacher his father was likely to punish him for that action.

This illustration is a historical example of interaction between parents, a student, and a teacher in a community setting. It provides some specifics to analyze in terms of the roles a community, parents, and students might play in assessing professional competency.

The example presents some evidence of

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teamwork between the teacher and the parents. The parents recognized the school's authority and the right of the teacher to take action which could be labeled as strong corporal punishment. These individuals were working together to establish a climate with motivation for learning, two of the more focal points individuals can attempt to provide a school system.

It may be stated that the student respected the right of his parents and teacher to make decisions in this area, especially if you enjoyed the special relationship with the student as did this writer. A reasonable assumption could be that the parents were attempting to direct their child in such a manner that he would be able to accept directions in a large group or on an individualized basis. This type of cooperation usually has been welcomed by educational staffs.

Questions on Instruction

But educators who have worked diligently to teach problem solving and value clarification probably would have uneasy feelings about the faith which these parents had in the instructor. The profession knows that it is not important that each child know how to write right-handed. It is possible that many teachers knew it in that era. From this example, it seems reasonable to infer that a proper role of the community, the parents, and the students is to question what takes place inside the classroom.

In fact, it might be a good idea to present these groups with several penetrating questions relating to instruction. Such questions might be:

- What is it the profession wants to teach?
- Why should these skills, ideas, values, etc., be taught?
- How does the profession know when these skills, ideas, and values have been taught?

I wonder what effect these questions would have if they were asked seriously by the community, parents, and students.

In the example, did the teacher and parents have an understanding of what

humane action is? Should one think that these individuals believed that any means justifies the end? Many current humanistic educators would be quick to point out that humanistic education gives great consideration to the health and welfare of students and that any means does not justify any end!

The community, parents, and/or students might have had some input into the curriculum construction of the school district at that time. Whether they did or not, it is important to make provisions allowing for their input. These groups are going to be affected by curriculum decisions, so it is important to involve them. If they do offer input, the profession needs to place itself in a position where the input can be accepted. It is to be expected that these groups will have different ideas from teachers and administrators. They will not necessarily sit by and rubber stamp what the profession wants to do.

Perhaps unfortunately, members of the community, parents, and students are not beating down the schoolhouse door in an attempt to participate in curriculum construction projects. There are some pertinent reasons for this. In many communities, it could be too threatening for them to share their beliefs and feelings. Another reason is that they know they have neither the background nor experience. Perhaps, even more realistically, it takes too much time. Probably the more obvious reason that they do not get involved is their recognition of and reliance upon the professional competency of the educator.

These groups need to recognize that any type of assessment is a very complex process. Teaching is especially complex! Why? Examine the following paragraph by Ornstein and Talmage:

It must be constantly reemphasized that distinguishing the multiple causes affecting student learning is nearly impossible and that attributing all of a child's success or failure in school to his teacher or principal is certainly wrong and unfair. Similarly, there is need to point out again that family characteristics have the greatest influence on most student learning. No one, including teachers and school adminis-

trators, should be held accountable for something he has little control over. The most that school people can be reasonably held responsible for is continually trying to better the quality of education for all children in all schools, within the limits imposed by the abilities of the child and conditions of the school.¹

There is no magic formula to providing the best possible education for the youth in any community. Assessment can take place only as programs are defined.

Implementing a Cooperative Program

Recognizing these facts, plus Foster's idea that there is merit in structuring a plan or strategy to provide a quality education, it is proposed that the community, parents, and students expend their energy in the areas where it will count the most and not attempt to assess the professional competency of educators, *per se*.²

Thomas maintains that the role of accountability is to improve the instructional program of students.³ The community, parents, and students can assist the educators to get the job done by:

- Developing a desirable climate for learning and teaching
- Providing the funds for operating a program which makes it possible to individualize instruction
- Constructing adequate building facilities
- Providing time for teachers and administrators to work on an individualized curriculum
- Sharing openly the good and poor experiences they are having with teachers and administrators so that the local board of education's evaluation policies can be implemented.

¹ Allan C. Ornstein and Harriet Talmage. "The Rhetoric and the Realities of Accountability." *Today's Education* 62 (6): 70-80; September-October 1973.

² Richard L. Foster. "Accountability: Social and Political Influence." Speech at ASCD Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 1973.

³ Don Thomas. "Don't Let the New 'Accountability' Make More Problems Than It Solves." *American School Board Journal* 160 (1): 59; January 1973.

These are a few basic ideas which could assist school districts to move forward toward implementing an educational program which can get the job of educating pupils done.

If these guidelines could be followed in an atmosphere of trust and faith, creative experiences would tend to be developed. It would be a climate where the Golden Rule might prevail. When teachers, students, parents, administrators, citizens, and the board really try to treat the other person the way they themselves want to be treated, there is a fundamentally sound basis upon which to build. At least this writer's contention is that it is a reasonable hypothesis to test in a school district.

School districts do not need the community, parents, or students to attempt to assess professional competency. The profession in any community has enough problems in this complicated area when teachers and administrators attempt to do the task. This does not mean that educators do not need feedback from these groups. They need to hear and listen to what the community, parents, and students have to say.

Unless the dynamics in the community for support and understanding of the educational undertaking are being developed, some of the really good things that can happen in providing a quality program come much harder. There is less spirit. Teachers and administrators put in less time on the job; to be sure, the required time is spent, but the time that goes into that extra effort can be lacking.

As I look back on my father's experience with penmanship, it turned out that he did learn how to write right-handed quite well. It happened because Dad and his parents valued cooperation with the teacher and schools. They valued it so much that they could overlook physical punishment for the good of the whole process. There are times when the community, parents, and students need to overlook some of the obvious mistakes the profession is making in both the classroom and the office in hopes of building a more durable climate which will allow the system to overcome weaknesses and build upon strengths. □

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