Recognizing Hard Edges in Reporting

How do we recognize when our reporting practices have hard edges and lack alignment with our own beliefs and values and the needs of the whole person? The following sections describe some indicators to watch for.

Reporting Behavior as Part of an Academic Score

We need to find ways to consider behaviors and report concerns and celebrations to parents without losing clarity about our reporting of academic learning. We should do both separately, as opposed to combining them into a single score. If we are assessing behavior, we must utilize tools that document learning over time, just as we do with academic learning. We need to be prepared to teach, intervene, reteach, and respond to concerns. Our reporting of behavior has a hard edge when we make reporting decisions minutes before our reporting deadlines or based on our feelings about students in the moment, as opposed to using data and opportunity for learning and growth. It is unfair to ourselves and our learners to make these kinds of professional judgments without deep consideration of what we expect and how we collect data to support our decisions.

Giving Marks That Lack Clarity

If we are spending inordinate amounts of time trying to manipulate a gradebook, calculate a mark, or justify the result we finally share, then we are sacrificing time we could be spending on formative assessment and feedback. When we calculate grades through a series of complicated mathematical maneuvers, there is a strong chance our reporting system is less about a conversation and more of a mystery to the people who matter the most: the students and their families. Students make decisions about us based on the decisions we make about them. Mysteries erode trust and indicate a hard edge.

Talking Only About Grades and Points

If our language around assessment and reporting continually falls back to grades and points ("This is for a grade" and "This will be on your report card"), we are severely limiting authentic engagement and student investment opportunities. Myron Dueck (2014) asserts, "Schools have trained students to be grade-focused rather than learning-focused" (p. 101). Furthermore, when we fail to illustrate the progression of learning through the variety of assessments (formative, preassessment, summative) we are implementing, then we are missing out on a

conversation that is so important. The things we should be reporting to families are the stories of amazing things that happen inside our schools every day. We have a lot to be proud of and so do our students.

Failing to Ensure Reporting Emerges From the Learning Goals

When our reporting is disconnected from the learning goals, it prevents rich discussions about self-assessment, feedback, and goal setting. When this happens, we can become disconnected from the learning cycle and instead focus on generic goals and figuring out ways to talk about challenges while avoiding conflict with families. This is a tremendously hard edge for teachers and promotes complete student disengagement in the process. When our reporting processes align completely with what we do every day in our classrooms, amazing clarity and growth can occur.

Allowing a Computer Program to Define and Communicate Learning

A computer program, no matter how strong, is not a teacher. Letting a machine make an important decision about student learning is the equivalent of giving away our professional expertise. It is our responsibility to report the degree to which we infer student learning, and ignoring this responsibility is ignoring the power we have in our classrooms. Our professional judgment, not the computer's algorithm, matters more.

Communicating Challenges Too Late or Not at All

Whether it is because we have failed to assess learning in a timely fashion or simply want to avoid uncomfortable conversations, it is ultimately ill-advised to fail to communicate students' learning challenges to them and their families. Both parties are critical to student success, and our strategies to support learning must be timely and used alongside students and their families. Experiencing difficulty is part of rich learning, and embracing these challenges and moving forward from them are the gifts of our education system.

Focusing Too Much on the Challenges

Nobody wants to be confronted with a long list of failures. Facing a laundry list of problems can be overwhelming to both students and their families. This is why considering the root causes of challenges, whether behavioral or academic, is so important. In this way, we can address the *first next thing* instead of everything all at once. For example, instead of informing parents that their child can't read at grade

level, it may be more helpful to share that we are working together on self-monitoring strategies to identify when comprehension breaks down. Furthermore, growth must start from a position of strength. Honoring a learner's strengths sets up everyone for optimism.

Assuming We Know What Parents Want

When we catch ourselves saying things like, "Parents don't care about . . ." or "Parents don't need to know . . ." we may be lingering in the realm of assumptions. Developing an authentic relationship with families is no less important than our relationship with their children. Reporting decisions, whether they occur inside our classrooms or on a larger scale, should be done in consultation with families. We may ask parents, "How do you want to hear about your child's learning?" "How much is too much and how much is too little?" "How do you prefer to be contacted?" "What do you want to know?" We can ask questions like these in parent surveys, during a parental engagement evening, or through phone calls. By engaging in rich discussions with our parent partners, we craft a shared purpose and process for surrounding learners with support and encouragement.

Leaving Students Out of the Conversation

Adults make most of the decisions in our education system. We decide what students will learn, when they learn it, and under what time constraints. We notify students when it is time to stop thinking about one subject and move on to another. We tell students who they are thinking for and how much their thinking is worth. It is essential to shift some of these decisions to the learners so they develop the independence, autonomy, and efficacy so essential for the development of their whole selves. Furthermore, students can serve as the strongest advocates for assessment change and are often the best equipped to explain shifts in assessment practices to their families. When we fail to include them in the assessment conversation, we fail to leverage incredible potential.

Not Allowing Students to Prepare for Student-Led Conferences (or Not Being Clear About the Purpose)

Student-led conferences sometimes falter because their purpose is not clear to everyone involved. Once we understand that we are engaging in a rich discussion about learning progress and the processes that support it, we can begin to make decisions about how to prepare students for the discussion. Like anyone without adequate time to reflect, learners cannot be expected to lead a discussion about

themselves. This is a difficult process for some students and, in supporting the whole student, we must purposefully prepare them. Simply eliminating students from the conferences may seem like an easy solution, but we can lose a rich partnership in the process.

Putting Impersonal Comments on the Report Card

The narratives we use to explain what we see and hear in our classrooms can support students' shifting views of who they are as learners. Comments on a report card can seem inconvenient, but the choices we make in sharing what we know about students can impact their perception of our level of commitment to their growth. When we are able to write our own comments, we might consider avoiding comments like "Thanks for being in my class" or "We will be learning fractions in the next unit," and instead write, "Joey's contributions to class discussions show a strong understanding of the content we have been exploring" or "Maria has set a personal goal to use models when exploring math questions. I am excited to see if this approach works well to build her understanding." In cases where we must choose from a bank of comments and have no option to personalize, we might consider *noticing* our learners by adding components to our reporting system (such as portfolios, blogs, or email) in addition to report cards. Using our students' names and personalizing our comments are part of a larger reporting system that aims to *notice* students and honor who they are.

References

Dueck, M. (2014). *Grading smarter, not harder: Assessment strategies that motivate kids and help them learn*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.