The Alberta Student Assessment Study:

Stage One Findings

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This report outlines Stage I findings of a 2-stage Alberta student assessment study undertaken by a research team representing the University of Calgary, the University of Alberta, and the University of Lethbridge. In the larger study the researchers will report on (a) optimal assessment theory, policies, and practice that will inform educational decision-making in Alberta; (b) educational leadership practices that support effective student assessment and reporting; and (c) describe comprehensive professional development models that will enhance the capacity of Alberta educators in classroom assessment.

Stage I reports findings that emerged from a series of focus groups with key educational stakeholders in Alberta, Canada. The study context is provided, the methodology outlined, emergent themes presented, perceptions about assessment highlighted, and the next stage of the study described.

**Context**

Alberta has steadfastly taken accountability in education seriously and its assessment policy is clear: “Student learning in education programs shall be assessed to assist in: improving programs, establishing and maintaining standards, and improving student achievement” (Alberta Learning, p. 1, 2003). The Alberta Education School Act states that “the Minister may establish tests, examinations or other methods for determining the ability, achievement or development of individuals, including but not limited to provincial achievement tests, diploma examinations and provincially—administered national and international tests” (Alberta Education, 2005, n.p.). Further, the act states that the Minister may use the test results in whole or in part as a basis for awarding credits, certificates, diplomas or transcripts of achievement or for recommending a program placement for a student or applicant.
Although Alberta Education has clear policy on accountability, Alberta educational organizations hold a full range of views about student assessment policies and practices. For instance, Alberta Education (2006c) states that its Grade Level of Achievement Reporting (GLAR) policy will promote a clear understanding of the Alberta curriculum, recognize normal variations in student achievement, promote the use of a range of assessment techniques, be useful for decision-making purposes, and promote clear communication among students, parents, and teachers. Moreover, the Alberta student assessment program supports classroom teachers with information about student strengths and weaknesses at the provincial level (Alberta Education, 2007a; 2007b). While not all stakeholders agree with the provincial student assessment program’s statements, at least some of the Alberta Education student assessment policies and practices are supported. For example, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) (2006) governance handbook states that the ASBA supports testing of all students for the purpose of monitoring overall student achievement in the province. Nevertheless, the ASBA also notes that the use of test data to rank teachers, schools, or school districts is unacceptable and recognizes that provincial student assessment can assess only some learner outcomes.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) (2006) agrees that assessment should be in support of student learning but cautions against use of multiple-choice questions that overemphasize lower-level knowledge at the expense of higher-level knowledge. The ATA notes that although students with special needs use adapted educational programs and are allowed special provisions for taking examinations, they may not have been taught some of the material covered in tested in the Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs). In addition, the ATA discourages teachers from using PATs in their evaluation activities and, moreover, is
opposed to using provincial achievement test data as a school accountability measure. Indeed, the ATA believes it has been marginalized in student assessment policy discussions (ATA, n.d.). Further, Alberta Education’s GLAR initiative is not supported by the ATA because it believes there will be little benefit for students and parents (Couture, 2007, 2008).

The College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) (2007) has taken a position in support of provincial student assessment but also supports reviewing some aspects of the existing assessment program. As well, CASS notes that student assessment should be both for and of learning.

These are only some of the position statements made by educational organizations in Alberta. Clearly, current student assessment policies and practices are contested and controversial; therefore, opportunity for a well-designed study—grounded in current classroom assessment theory, research and development literature—that engages members of educational organizations to provide insights, suggest possible directions, promote collaboration among stakeholders, and facilitate productive dialogue about student assessment in Alberta, is a timely and necessary undertaking.

**Literature Review Summary**

Student assessment is a contested educational issue in most of the Western world (ABC News, 2008; Pellegrino, 2006; Stiggins, 2007; Wiliam, 2001; Yeh, 2006). It generates controversy and polarized views, possibly due to its political nature and also because it is not widely understood. Because of the limited scope of this paper, a comprehensive literature review is precluded and this review is restricted to classroom and external assessment.

At least three main issues have been identified as barriers to student assessment being perceived as a positive educational endeavor: (1) teachers’ weak understanding of fair
assessment practices; (2) teachers' perceptions of external accountability initiatives; and, (3) the impact of inappropriate assessment of at-risk students. As a consequence, government-imposed external assessment such as the PATs, may provoke the view that assessment is one of the most disliked and resisted components of teaching (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Burger & Krueger, 2003).

Generally, teachers are not proficient in appropriate student assessment practices (Burke, 2005; Perkins, 1992; Smith, 1986; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004). This is attributed to several causes, for example, poor planning. That is, teachers carry out unfocussed assessment planning, using hastily constructed assessment activities as an afterthought for grading purposes only, thus contributing to invalid student achievement inferences (Earl, 2003; Stiggins, (2002); Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, 2005).

Second, many teachers use few and single-purpose assessment strategies instead of the multiple and varied approaches recommended for effective evaluation (Alberta Education, 2006b; Black, et al., 2003; Davies, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Stiggins, et al., 2004; Wiggins, 1993). Third, teachers tend to ask low-level cognitive test questions (Aitken, 1994; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black, et al, 2003; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Stiggins, 2002; Wiggins, 1993; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), and as a result omit important curricular outcomes, by testing trivia instead of using items that reveal depth of understanding (Perkins, 1992; Popham, 2002).

Further problematic teacher practices include aggregating behavior and student achievement, for example, awarding zero for late assignments (punishment for misbehavior) and averaging these marks with student academic achievement. These practices result in inaccurate descriptions of student knowledge and skills (Guskey, 2004; O’Connor, 2002;
The original stated purpose of most standardized testing, such as the PATs in Alberta, is to monitor programs and provide additional information about student achievement to support learning (Alberta Education, 2007c). Misusing these results, for example, as “league tables” to compare schools and school districts, potentially promotes teacher frustration. It also may foster inappropriate teaching practices, such as limiting important curricular outcomes by teaching to the external test (Aiken, 1991; Aitken, 1994; Bracey, 2005; Burger & Krueger, 2003; Cannell, 1987; Earl, 2003; Fairhurst, 1993; Lewis, 2007; Smith, 1991; Wolf, 2002). Moreover, school comparisons based on standardized test data may not take into account student demographics. For example, a growing number of Canadian children and youth are designated at-risk for experiencing school failure and difficulties with transitioning into adult life (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2000). Those considered at-risk
include children who are culturally and linguistically diverse, the gifted, and those living in conditions characterized by transiency, substance abuse, and poverty.

Although provincial assessment policies and practices have been effective for setting the direction and establishing a framework for educational change, it is ultimately regular classroom teachers who have the major responsibility for making inclusive education work (Lupart & Webber, 1996, 2002) and, therefore, require adequate support as they gather, interpret, and use assessment data. Further, effective assessment and evaluation practices are integral to the welfare of all Alberta students (Alberta Learning, 2003). It is essential that stakeholders work collaboratively to continue to improve student assessment practice that includes accurate interpretation and communication of results, and embraces all appropriate forms of assessment and accountability as significant processes for student success in the 21st Century.

Methodology

Although the larger study has adopted a multi-staged mixed methods approach (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006), the current paper addresses only Stage I of stakeholder focus groups. To identify key assessment issues relevant to various stakeholders within Alberta, a process of stakeholder consultation was initiated, as portrayed graphically in Figure 2 in the Discussion section of this report. Initial key stakeholders included Alberta Education (three managerial levels), the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta Teachers’ Association, the Alberta School Boards Association (elected school board members), the Alberta School Councils’ Association (parents), the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) (representing teachers, principals, school board members, university faculty, and provincial government employees), and two of the three major provincial universities. The researchers
acknowledge the complexities of participants’ views that were frequently influenced by their multiple roles as professionals, parents, and community members. Study participants were drawn from both urban and rural contexts and represented public and Catholic jurisdictions.

As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 836), as a methodology, focus groups are a “collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences, and beliefs.” They are essentially interviews conducted with groups of “individuals … [who] are well informed about the research topic” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 244). Focus groups enable interactions between the participants that enhance data quality (Patton, 2002). They reveal “the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view or great diversity of views” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). To this end, cross-role focus groups were used to maximize the exploration of differing perspectives, while role-alike focus groups allowed for a more thorough exploration of particular perspectives. The stakeholder focus groups were conducted face-to-face in stakeholders’ facilities or on university campuses to maximize convenience to the participants and to ensure they felt comfortable in a familiar setting. One noteworthy element of the focus group procedure was that the researchers projected their notes of the proceedings onto a screen as they were being typed in real time, allowing participants to view and validate that the researcher's notes accurately captured their views. Most sessions also were audio recorded.

**Data Analysis**

In Stage I the research team used grounded theory for the data analysis procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Further, three members of the research team independently coded focus group data to provide a thematic analysis, and interrater reliability as described by Huberman (2002) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000).
Preliminary Findings

Six themes from the data analysis emerged over a two-month period from focus groups with representatives of Alberta Education, teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, and parent councils. Perceptions from students, parents, and cultural minority groups will be gathered in Stage 2 and, therefore, are not represented in this paper.

The themes included a range of issues and perceptions; however, it must be noted that the majority of the stakeholders were able to offer balanced perspectives overtly identifying and articulating positive aspects as well as challenges within the themes. Some of the study participants were able to see the positive and negative contributions of the stakeholders involved in the Alberta educational context. Unfortunately, where this was not the case there was no mistaking the high levels of concern, even anxiety and suspicion, held by some individuals.

The six themes are illustrated in Figure 1.
The Alberta Student Assessment Study

Politics of assessment
- policy
- accountability
- mistrust
  - confusion exacerbated by lack of knowledge base about terminology, how components fit (formative/assessment/program evaluation/student evaluation)

Teacher learning
- professional development
- pre-service
- need mentoring
- Alberta Initiative for School Improvement projects
- Alberta Assessment Consortium as professional learning opportunity
- teacher competence in student assessment
- professional Learning Communities

Decision making
- evidence-based decision making
- resource allocation, staffing, student placements
- formative
- summative
- 'mission creep'
  - lack of clarity about purposes of tests
  - multi-purposes for assessment data

Communication and relationships
- teachers
- parents
- Students
- Postsecondary institutions
- employers
- emotive nature of this topic
- communication of results

Leadership
- alignment needed
- policy
- practice
- teaching and learning
- curriculum
- instructional leadership

Other variables
- time to address core elements of curriculum
- minority
- special needs
Emergent Themes

1. Politics of Assessment

This predominant theme encompassed issues related to policy, accountability at all organizational levels, stakeholder mistrust of each other, widespread confusion about student assessment, and a sense of professional responsibility to both the educational and wider communities.

Discussions of student assessment in Alberta contained a strong emotional element, perhaps understandable considering the implicit expectations for accountability for all roles across the education system. Reported emotions ranged from the positive ("belief in teachers’ capacity to teach and assess well" and "confidence in the system") to the negative ("concern" to "mistrust" to "paranoia"). Confidence in teacher professionalism was evident among several stakeholder groups. “Concerns” included parents’ expectations for information about their children’s academic progress. “Mistrust” was used to describe several phenomena, including employer use of data, perceived lack of confidence in teachers’ abilities to assess well, impact of school rankings published by organizations such as the Fraser Institute,1 and other stakeholders’ agendas and perspectives, resulting in “mistrust at best but perhaps sabotage at worst.” “Paranoia” was evident, for example, in the attribution of “conspiracy theory perspectives.” One participant explained it this way:

What I would like to see, that recognition there is nothing to be feared. The boogeyman under the table is of our own creation and is not necessary. It does a

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1 The Fraser Institute claims that it is an independent non-partisan research and educational organization based in Canada.
disservice to the development and maintenance of an excellent educational system.... If you fear the dust bunnies under the table you are doing yourself and your school a disservice and (also) the children you serve.

Rationale for these views included the belief that “math phobia” was prevalent among many educators and hinders correct interpretation and appropriate use of the range of assessment data available in educational communities.

Fear of anything quantitative—hear things like numbers are fine but you can’t measure everything—there are ways of assessing beauty, etc. We need not be afraid of measurement and assessing. Every time you cross the street you assess whether you have enough time to do that. This is how we make our way through the world and survive but there is this fear out there. We need through leadership and the universities to get people over this reluctance and fear...assessment is what we do. It helps us to make good decisions. Like our innate fear of snakes— even being bitten tells us something.

Perceptions of educators’ inadequate assessment knowledge and expertise in assessment contributed to calls for accountability and mistrust of teacher judgments. For example, participants cited instances of poor assessment practices, such as using assessment as a behavior management strategy or a punishment, and teachers “cheating” in the administration of the provincial tests, which reinforced negative perceptions of teacher professionalism and calls for increased accountability. Additionally, participants frequently described teachers teaching to the test, even though the tests cover only a proportion of the prescribed curriculum. Further, some participants expressed concerns that Grade 12 Diploma Examinations precluded teachers attending sufficiently to all
curricular components, this despite teachers’ capacity to assess all program outcomes and to contribute 50% of student course-work grades to the Diploma Examination final grade (Alberta Education (2007b).

There was confusion about the validity of student assessment data, the purposes for collecting data, and the actual impact of poor standardized test results. Study participants indicated the utility of national and international comparisons but cautioned against whole-scale adoption of assessment policies and acceptance of expert opinion when contexts are different, e.g., “high stakes testing,” a contentious and value-laden term with a negative connotation exacerbated by America’s No Child Left Behind policy. Study participants used this in ways that did not reflect in-depth knowledge of how it has very different meanings in different countries. Although study participants noted the potential value of studying and exploring assessment practices that work in other Western countries, they also cautioned against verbatim adoption of terminology and policies from one culture and using them uncritically in Alberta.

Further, tensions associated with student assessment led to a fear of publicly expressing controversial views and also to widespread calls for stakeholders to work together for “what is good for kids.” The comment was made by one participant that the educational stakeholders should avoid “turning inwards and fighting each other” as it is “very counterproductive and undignified and we need to focus on the larger issue.”

Other tensions highlighted by focus group participants included the perceived “stress on children” of testing, although other participants observed that “the stressors are associated with adults, not kids” and that “we use ‘high stakes’ to refer to ‘high emotional stakes.’” For example, some described the PATs as “high stakes” initiatives that set up a
climate of stress within schools even though the PATs are intended to provide data about general school and curriculum effectiveness (Alberta Education, 2007a). Nevertheless, the adults’ stress may be understandable when reports are made that teachers with poor PAT results are disallowed from teaching a particular grade level or subject in the future.

Importantly, many of the stakeholders recognized pockets of excellence in student assessment practices. Further, some but not all stakeholders manifested a strong sense of professional responsibility to their particular educational communities and also to secondary stakeholders such as business, industry, and the social service sector, for example.

2. Decision Making

This theme related to assessment-related decision-making at the classroom, school, district, and provincial levels. The school level involved resource allocation, staffing, and student placement. Classroom-related decision-making included formative and summative judgments. An issue that permeated all levels was a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose and data collection uses.

Study participants consistently iterated concern about the perceived expansion of the purposes of standardized testing—accountability, curriculum revision, resource allocation, targeting for professional development—a phenomenon they described as “mission creep.” An associated issue involved provincial testing data not being returned to schools in a format that educators perceived as informing teaching and learning, thus reinforcing their perceptions of the tests’ lack of value within the educational process. Participants expressed the desire to be able to use assessment data to inform transitions from class-to-class, school-to-school, and school-to-external institution. Additionally,
participants’ poor understanding of the plans for implementation and use of achievement test data, plus the wide perception that GLAR was implemented poorly, albeit in a highly charged atmosphere that made implementation and communication difficult, contributed to an apparent overall confusion surrounding student assessment.

A more positive perspective of GLAR reflected potential communication benefits:

*With the First Nations population, there are often lots of barriers that students must get around to get to school.... We tried to create a more level playing field so more people had the same level of information and understanding. Lots of barriers, including funding, so we collaborated with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to see if we can meet the needs of students on reserves better. So with GLA [GLAR] we thought it might be a way to share information...when a student moves from a FN school to a provincial school.... If they have a GLA that is carried to the provincial school then the receiving school is better informed.*

Though this study focuses on student assessment in its broadest sense, it is important to highlight what members of one focus group articulated. That is, of the 16 measures within Alberta Education’s Accountability Pillar, the provincial accountability framework for education, only four measures overtly relate to standardized examinations (Alberta Education, 2006a). Therefore, although student assessment measures are important, a balanced perspective needs to be taken and an overemphasis on student assessment ought to be avoided.

3. Teacher Learning

Teacher learning encompassed preservice education, professional development, mentoring, and professional learning processes that involved student teachers, novice-to-
experienced teachers, teacher leaders, school and district administrators, and other community members. These four subthemes included a province-wide school improvement project (Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, AISI) and involvement in initiatives sponsored by the AAC. Collectively, the components of this theme indicated a strong and urgent need for more and more effective learning opportunities related to student assessment.

There was a clear polarization of views across all representative groups about teacher knowledge and expertise in good assessment practices. The desire for greater convergence of theory and practice was expressed. Research-based practice was valued and participants endorsed projects, such as AISI (Alberta Education, 2008) and regional consortia, which promoted the development of teacher learning in this area.

Study participants noted the challenge of time, particularly the perceived need to focus on core elements of the provincial curriculum that were more likely to be included in the PATs and Diploma Examinations. Time concerns also included workload alleviation for teacher leaders to support others in developing their assessment literacy. As well, continual implementation of a range of mandated initiatives exacerbated educators’ perceptions of scarcity of time.

Participants considered preservice teacher education programs inadequate and even thought to model inappropriate assessment processes; however, the limited nature of assessment preparation was seen as understandable within the multitude of expectations for novice educators. As a result, the need for professional development was seen as acute, particularly in the area of “statistical literacy,” sound assessment strategies, and deep understandings of quality assessment. Participants called for greater access to
effective school-based professional development, rejecting “one-shot workshops,” and desiring more opportunities for collegial “rich conversations,” all on an ongoing basis. From the administrative perspective, participants raised questions about how to engage all teachers and to motivate those who resist professional learning.

4. Communication and Relationships

Effective communication among all stakeholders was a major theme. Key stakeholders were described as teachers, parents, students, postsecondary institutions, and employers. The emotive dimension of student assessment emerged as a strong component of this theme, as did the need for more frequent, timely, and clear communication of student achievement.

Parent council representatives and educators both stated their frustration with ineffective communication that fosters “a lack of trust in teacher judgment” and “the distancing of parents from schools.” The converse argument also emerged regarding the difficulty associated with encouraging some parents to engage in dialogue with their children’s school and teachers.

When it comes to parental involvement, one of our main pushes... has been to invite parents to be more involved in the education of their students. We also know there is a need for information to parents about standardized and classroom assessment.

Parents were receptive to the possibility of participating with teachers in professional development that focused on extending their understandings of good assessment. Overall, parental perspectives focused on their desire for their children to experience quality teaching. Parents observed insufficient recognition of the role of
students in assessment and the impact of teacher communication effectiveness on students’ motivation.

*If we could put the assessment...into the hands of students—we need to move full bore on that one so students can take control of their own learning and assessment is part of that. Damn the torpedoes on that one!* 

There was some doubt that student achievement was being reported accurately. Parents identified deficiencies in reporting formats, citing problematic use of “educational jargon” and a lack of comparative information about their children and peer groups. Reporting was perceived to be too limited, not capturing students’ “social and emotional growth.” Further, representatives of several stakeholder groups, not only parents, noted that discrepancies were evident between what parents and teachers know about children’s achievement. Additionally, another cause for concern arose when teachers did not report the PATs’ preliminary results, particularly when data were used to rank schools. In turn, educators noted the delayed communication to schools of provincial achievement results impeded the use of the data, for example, in assisting with student transitions between grades, across schools, to postsecondary institutions, and/or into the work force.

Grade Level of Achievement Reporting emerged as a problematic initiative due in part to implementation challenges and a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose and intended use of GLAR data. For instance, Alberta Education participants described GLAR as a tool for enhancing communication among school personnel and parents, while some teachers perceived the GLAR initiative as ambiguous and appeared to lack confidence in their ability to report categorically student achievement outside of the
grades in which teachers, themselves, have experience. For this initiative to be implemented more successfully and effectively, then professional development will need to facilitate collegial dialogue across grade levels and subject areas.

5. Instructional Leadership

Study group participants noted the need for strong, responsible provincial leadership in establishing and maintaining high quality educational programs. They then stated the need for leadership at the provincial government level “to filter down to the other levels.” They acknowledged the quality of the Alberta education system, linking that with ongoing curriculum review, and “maintenance” of standards through provincial student assessment programs, providing “a bulwark against grade inflation” so that postsecondary institutions “know what 70% means which advantages the Alberta student.” It was reported that Deans of Science across the nation recognize “the competencies of students in what they bring to their first year of studies.”

Participants also expressed a widespread need for greater use of assessment data for “instructional leadership” purposes by principals. They indicated the need for stronger alignment among policy implementation, curriculum planning, and teacher practice, thus promoting improved teaching and learning. Further, it was acknowledged that Alberta teachers have demonstrated considerable capacity to adopt innovative teaching strategies but not innovative assessment practices. Therefore, a critical focal point for instructional leaders is in the area of improvement and enhancement of student assessment practices.

[There is a] false sense out there that if you make a change in assessment practices then the marks will go down, even though [evidence]...suggests that
marks do not go down but engage students in meaningful assessment practices, help kids get engaged in the subject matter and they can do really, really well.

The importance of principals, in particular their role as instructional leaders in schools, was recognized in most focus groups. Participants indicated that a “climate of fear” around student assessment represents a failure of leadership. Further, there was a range of beliefs about the requisite knowledge of principals, including “assessment literacy,” as some participants indicated that principals needed only to support skilled teacher leaders while others were convinced that principals themselves must possess in-depth understanding of assessment. However, study participants noted the generally insufficient level of principal preparation in the area of leading assessment, both in graduate programs and in ongoing professional development. The importance of ongoing support for teacher leaders was cited as these individuals are future principals.

Educational leaders, particularly in rural and remote schools, face the additional constraint of maintaining a strong professional knowledge base about student assessment because of high levels of staff turnover across schools and among provinces. This phenomenon is exacerbated when the leadership within the school is disrupted due to administrative transfers.

Finally, leadership is crucial in the appropriate use of data, although principals may face a range of challenges. For example, preoccupation with “high stakes tests results,” may encourage micromanagement styles that undermine teacher morale. That is, principals considered the need to be “gatekeepers” and to “boycott ministry initiatives” in the belief that they are protecting their staff from the misuse of assessment data and
refocusing them on student learning, although such reactions may increase rather than ameliorate tensions associated with student assessment in Alberta.

6. Social Justice

This eclectic theme covered diverse issues such as problematic assessment practices related to students with special needs and those from cultures outside the mainstream and, additionally, the complexity of assessing for society’s diverse expectations for all students. For example, participants expressed concerns about the wealth of information available from Alberta’s standardized examinations that highlights achievement gaps between mainstream student populations and minority groups such as First Nations children and, usually focusing on deficiencies, tends to obscure learning strengths.

*When it comes to standardized assessment there is often a negative feeling that the tools do not reflect students’ cultural backgrounds and prior experiences and knowledge. Are the tools meaningful and are the assessments meaningful? Meaningful learning and meaningful assessment always go hand in hand.... From my experience it often is that the standardized assessments are seen as culturally biased.... Is there any way that we could create a test that is relevant and effective for the Blackfoot around Calgary and use it in Whitehorse?*

Even though evidence of this worrying phenomenon has existed for many years, little progress has been made to address it. This relative lack of progress in supporting at-risk children was noted in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL), refugee, and special-needs student populations: “Our assessment practices should be effective for all students, special needs and ESL. We need to focus on them as well.”
Participants highlighted the need for greater acceptance among educators of the appropriateness of accommodating students’ different abilities to participate in assessment practices:

*Failure is not an option…. How much failure data do we have to have about a student before we intervene? What kind of compensation tools? We put a premium on things you can store in your head. If I need a tool to help with a task then I’m not as smart as another student. In terms of special education students we have to start examining those types of issues.*

Participants recommended that incremental achievement milestones for these students be emphasized as opposed to highlighting deficiencies evident in provincial test results. They recommended establishing communication systems that better linked students’ achievement records to their current locations, a particularly important initiative in the context of highly mobile students. Also, study participants noted that provincial standardized assessment instruments too often use terms and concepts that are culturally inappropriate or foreign for many students.

One of the key stakeholder groups noted the complexity of assessment, resulting from the “different paradigms” held by society. Focus group participants identified four paradigms, with the first being the most obvious: assessment of knowledge. The second is the view that schools should prepare students for their places in society and to manifest “good citizenship.” The third paradigm is the perspective that schools should “prepare students for the world of work” with the requisite employability skills. The final paradigm subscribes to “developing the natural talents of students.” These diverse paradigm perspectives about what should be included in student assessment and how the
assessment should be conducted create constraints in establishing productive dialogue that values and respects differing viewpoints.

**Discussion**

The focus group information reported here reflects Stage I observations that will be refined as the Alberta Student Assessment Study progresses and additional insights are gained from other stakeholders in Stage II. However, the research process employed to date suggests a framework for renewing government-mandated student assessment policies and practices. Figure 2 portrays the process (displayed as rectangles) and anticipated outcomes (displayed as ovals) from this research study.

One significant component of the process is the identification and involvement of primary and secondary stakeholders with a view to elicit their insights related to student assessment. An unusual aspect of the process is the incorporation of public lectures, an online presence, and consultation with experts, all conducted concurrent with a traditional literature review. Upon identification and publication of initial themes, secondary stakeholders who frequently are considered silent partners in the educational process will be consulted synchronously and asynchronously in face-to-face and online forums. Additionally, targeted data collection, including surveys and case studies, will increase the generalizability of study findings and describe good assessment practice and evidence-based decision making. Finally, dissemination of study findings to stakeholders will occur through the development of a report which will inform stakeholder decision making, inform government policy making, and guide ongoing professional development. Professional development processes within this study involve Lectures Series I and II with anticipated outcomes that include a resource-rich website, and two published texts.
that embody the collective wisdom of experts and practitioners from national and international settings.

Questions emerging from Stage I of the Alberta Student Assessment Study include the following:

- What are the components of the politics of assessment?
- What do the major players believe about assessment?
- Who among the major stakeholders exert the most influence on student assessment policies and practices?
- How can the tension surrounding student assessment be ameliorated?
- How can decision making respect all stakeholders?
- How can assessment policy and practice be evidence-based?
- How can partisan perspectives, which actively impede stakeholder collaboration and inhibit progress, be ameliorated?
- How can representatives from particular stakeholder groups avoid assuming stereotypical perspectives of one another?
- How can the major players foster an assessment environment based on principles of democracy, collegiality, and respect?
- How can we come to a shared understanding of instructional leadership?
- What does instructional leadership involve in the context of student assessment?
- How can instructional leadership be established and sustained?
- What are the attributes of instructional leadership at school, district, and provincial levels?
- What are the effects on students of poor assessment practices?
• How much student assessment is enough?

• What is required to establish effective professional development focusing on student assessment?

• How can professional development be designed and delivered so that it capitalizes on teachers’ existing knowledge base?

• What avenues of professional development are most productive?

• How can disenfranchised educators be engaged in ongoing professional learning?

• Have the connections between technology and assessment been examined in sufficient detail?

As these questions are explored in Stage II of the study, it will be important to keep in mind the advice of two study participants:

*I don’t want people to get the impression that assessment practices are in the dumps, not doing justice for students. We’re doing well and we could do better.*

*It’s going from good to great. We don’t want to throw out the baby with the bath water…. I leave this room thinking we are doing a pretty good job with the circumstance we are in.*

*People in classrooms, school jurisdictions, all have the common purpose of doing what’s best for kids. They are working very hard to do that. We need to support them and our orientation should be to help and support.*
We are here

- identify study objectives
- identify primary stakeholders
- consult stakeholders
- identify themes
- Develop guiding questions
- identify secondary stakeholders
- Literature review
- offer lecture series I & II as professional development
- compile resource website
- publish book I
- publish book II
- targeted additional data collection
- consult all stakeholders
- report to stakeholders
- increase general assessment knowledge base of larger community: schools, districts, government, parents, students, educators, researchers, employers, postsecondary institutions

- report preliminary findings to scholarly community
- identify additional themes and guiding questions
- inform stakeholder decisions
- inform government policy
- guide ongoing professional development
Conclusion

The Alberta Student Assessment Study has been underway since Fall, 2007. The researchers took two months formulate the research design and obtain research ethics clearance from the three partner universities. Initial consultation with primary stakeholders with focus group meetings and a first public lecture series have been completed, with a second a second series underway. As well, a website has been established and is being maintained. Emergent themes based on focus groups with the majority of primary stakeholders have been identified. A set of initial guiding questions for the second stage of the study has emerged from this thematic analysis and observations of the dynamics within and across focus groups. As a result of consultation with primary stakeholders, consultation with secondary stakeholders will lead to targeted additional data collection, Fall, 2008. This will include surveys and case studies that will provide and enable generalizability and exemplars of good assessment practice. Study findings will be disseminated in various ways, including a final report to stakeholders, enriched website, edited books, and ongoing professional development. It is anticipated that the report will inform stakeholder decision-making, formulation of government policy, and professional development infrastructure. The edited books, intended to support preservice and leadership preparation programs, will include insights from provincial, national, and international leading scholars and practitioners. Other possible outcomes include a student assessment handbook for classroom teachers, and a research handbook for scholars in the field of student assessment.
Stage I findings include several potentially significant observations. First, consultations with stakeholders revealed the highly controversial nature of assessment, possibly due to the inherent links to accountability and judgments about teachers. There was acknowledgement and affirmation of good aspects of assessment practice and assessment professional development that is occurring in pockets across Alberta. Second, levels of stakeholder understanding of student assessment ranged across a continuum from highly sophisticated and well informed to naïve or even inaccurate. Similarly, stakeholders frequently expressed inaccurate assumptions about the perspectives and motivations of other stakeholders and how those were positioned relative to one another. Next, there is a critical need for better relationships and more effective communication among stakeholders with varied roles, responsibilities, and perspectives, particularly among the education system, parents, and students. Further, leadership, including instructional leadership, was identified as crucial in the establishment and maintenance of good assessment practice and evidence-based decision making. All parties consulted to this point articulated concern with the inconsistent quality of classroom assessment practices across the province. Finally, there is a clear need and demand for student assessment and evaluation to be addressed in teacher education programs, leadership preparation initiatives, and ongoing professional development programming offered by schools, districts, regional consortia, the AAC, and universities.
References


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The Alberta Student Assessment Study


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