



# Equity Dispatch

Cultivating Student Agency In And Through Assessment



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**“Student voice is a fundamental characteristic of democratic education and change in teacher practice must be a collaborative effort involving students”**

-Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton, 2011



## Did You Know

Current Classroom Assessment Practices Can Constrain Student Agency?

Traditional methods of classroom assessment may silence the voices of the ones most effected by evaluative results—the students. Tests, quizzes, and

participation points—if used only to gauge and sort are not meaningful ways of determining individual student needs, and do not provide students a platform for dialogue (McMillan, 2003). Student-inclusive classroom environments, ones that center positive student/educator interaction and value students' input in classroom logistics and transformation (Bron & Veugelers, 2014), predicates cultivating student agency in and through assessment.

Classroom assessment typically involves a summative process, such as a test result, that only captures evaluative information at one moment in time. This contrasts with formative assessment, such as a weekly progress report that follows students' progress closely and more regularly. Reliance solely on summative assessment practices to determine student progress can produce inaccurate representations of a student's daily classroom life and achievement (McMillan, 2003). This feedback alone is insufficient for mapping a student's development and does not position the student beyond being a passive observer (Stiggins, 2001).

K-12 schools exist in a high-stakes testing environment resulting in stressful conditions on both students and teachers—creating an atmosphere of pressure to produce results rather than positively motivating the mastery of materials (Stiggins, 2001). The emphasis in utilizing “high-stakes” tests in assessing student progress comes as a result of inadequate resource allocation to the development of effective classroom assessments (Stiggins, 2001). Consequently, classroom assessment development is left to the devices of educators who may have little to no classroom assessment training and are under pressure to align their curriculum to testing formats (McMillan, 2003; Stiggins, 2001). An over-emphasis on summative assessment can be counter-productive to the goal of encouraging students to succeed—especially when not all students respond the same way to that brand of assessment (e.g., defeat due to low test scores vs. motivation to do better next time) (Stiggins, 2003).

In order for educators to establish a classroom environment in which all students flourish, a paradigm shift of the function of classroom assessment must occur. The idea that “adult decisions drive school effectiveness,” and “grades and test scores maximize student motivation and learning,” (Stiggins, 2007, p.29) must be reimagined in a way that does not exclude the learner, nor ignore students' individual learning paths.



## Why It Matters

Authentic Student Agency Helps Foster A Productive and Equitable Learning Environment For All Students

Relying solely on standardized testing results in neglecting student voice, and provides an incomplete snapshot of the whole student (McMillan, 2003; Stiggins, 2001). In our over reliance on standardized tests, we neglect the intimate culture of the classroom to focus on a more formal standard of evaluation. Studies have shown that implementing student-led assessment practices is an effective strategy in raising classroom morale. Furthermore, students became more focused and

academically successful, so long as they feel supported (Tholander, 2009; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004) toward realizing their agency. As educators, we should move toward providing enriching learning experiences that engender equitable learning environments, cultivating students as active co-constructors in their learning. To do this, we need more comprehensive information than just a nominal score.

Authentic student agency in the classroom means providing opportunities for students to speak their truths and integrate the knowledge they already possess from lived experiences ( [Great Lakes Equity Center](#), 2015). This empowers students and solidifies active, meaningful participation toward realizing their own liberated voice and emancipatory potential in the classroom. In this way, students' perspectives and opinions are not treated as cursory aspects of classroom function, but rather an integral and valued addition to a more democratic learning experiences (Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton, 2011). Providing students the platform to have a role in classroom decisions and assessment is a favorable way to foster an environment where all students are encouraged, and motivated to learn and succeed (Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton 2011) through self-critique and critical examination of the learning environment.

In addition to having a complete picture of each student and their academic needs and strengths, student-inclusive classroom assessments also use individual stories to shape the classroom in a constructive way; this leads the educator towards guiding relevant instruction (Stiggins, 2007). Student-inclusive classroom assessment influences the development of students self-perception about their abilities, improves their motivation to learn, and encourages the development of and sustainability of learning skills (Crooks, 1988).

If done strategically, a co-construction of the learning environment through formative assessment can instill a sense of onus in each student, both dignifying and establishing responsibility. Bron and Veugelers (2014) argue there are four elements of student involvement that are important to student agency: 1) space, or giving students an opportunity to express their views; 2) voice, or allowing students to facilitate; to express their views; 3) audience, where student views must be acknowledged; and 4) influence, where student views must be acted upon as appropriate. These strategies, woven into student-inclusive assessment, can serve as a good starting point towards students and teacher(s) collaboratively creating learning environments that center and value authentic student voice and allow students to claim their role as empowered actors in the teaching the learning process.



## For Equity Now

Student-Led Conferencing Liberates Students Towards Achieving Authentic Agency and Academic Success

conferencing format can help to ensure all students have influence in classroom instruction and agency in their individual progress, moving towards a co-construction of the learning environment that respects students as active participants in the learning process.

Student-led conferencing on the basic level is a process that allows students to report their academic progress to their parents/caregivers, (Little & Allan, 1989) teachers, and peers, rather than the traditional method of parent/caregiver and teacher interaction, that often leaves the student in a passive position. Tholander (2009) gives two main student-centered arguments for this assessment method. First, he believes this democratic shift not only gives students agency, but also helps bridge the gap between school and home, as miscommunication can often occur through traditional parent-teacher conferencing. Additionally, this pedagogical switch suggests students' learning benefits by becoming more self-directed and responsible for their subsequent development (Tholander, 2009). Student-led conferencing lends itself to a more balanced assessment system that encourages students' genuine understanding, which can in turn make summative assessment outcomes more meaningful (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2007).

A way to begin the implementation of student-led conferencing is to develop a process for students to create portfolios of their work. By students being in charge of collecting their work over time, it not only shows a visual timeline of progression, but it encourages responsibility for upkeep, builds confidence, and exercises ownership of the learning experience (Le Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Stiggins, 2001; Tholander, 2009).

Next, working with the students to develop an agenda of talking points, and coaching them is also a helpful step (Le Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). This will help quell the students' nerves, and assists in providing practice for preparedness (Le Countryman & Schroeder, 1996).

Finally, it is important for teachers to not dominate the conversation, but position themselves as a facilitator demonstrating a respect of space, voice, and dignity for the student (Bron & Veugelers, 2014). Educators have the capacity to revolutionize classroom assessment in ways that better motivate students to reach their full potential (Stiggins, 2001). In truly advocating for and following through with student-led assessment, we can begin to mobilize emancipatory assessment and learning practices in the classroom for all students.

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## Meet the Authors

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