A Call for Change in Summative Assessment: Ideas Generated by Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Carolyn Clarke, St. Francis Xavier University
Steven Van Zoost, Acadia University
Jo Anne Broders, Newfoundland & Labrador English School District

Abstract:
The changes in summative assessment because of COVID-19 initiated many reflections and discussions between students and teachers. In this article, we document the importance of student involvement in their summative assessments and show the importance of considering students, along with their teachers, as users of assessment. We investigate student views on assessment and how they gain agency by having choice and input into their summative assessments. Students identified four aspects of assessment as key: having agency and choice, making assessment "personal", experiencing authentic learning, and valuing classroom discussion as assessment. To address the concerns raised by students in this research, we identify ways in which curricula and assessment policies may need to change to accommodate students.

Keywords: summative assessment; student-involved assessment; secondary school; COVID-19 pandemic; Canadian study

Un appel au changement dans l'évaluation sommative : Idées générées par les élèves pendant la pandémie de COVID-19

Résumé :
Les changements apportés à l'évaluation sommative par la pandémie de COVID-19 ont suscité de nombreuses réflexions et discussions entre les élèves et les enseignant·e·s. Dans cet article, nous mettons en évidence l'importance de l'implication des élèves dans leurs évaluations sommatives, et nous soulignons la nécessité de les considérer, au même titre que leurs enseignant·e·s, comme des usager·ères de l'évaluation. Nous considérons les points de vue des élèves sur l'évaluation et la manière dont ils développent leur agentivité lorsqu'ils disposent d'un pouvoir de choix et d'un rôle actif dans la conception de leurs évaluations sommatives. Les élèves ont identifié quatre aspects clés de l'évaluation : la possibilité d'avoir de l'autonomie et du choix, le caractère personnalisé de l'évaluation, l'expérience d'un apprentissage authentique, et la valorisation des discussions en classe comme forme d'évaluation. Afin de répondre aux préoccupations soulevées par les élèves dans cette recherche, nous proposons des pistes de transformation des programmes d'études et aux politiques d'évaluation afin qu'ils répondent mieux aux besoins et réalités des élèves.

Mots clés : évaluation sommative; évaluation impliquant les élèves; école secondaire; pandémie de COVID-19; étude canadienne

During the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, provincial examinations across Canada were cancelled and summative grading practices were put on hold (Cooper et al., 2022). As it was a world-wide concern during the pandemic, the World Bank (2020) asked which approach to examinations might be best—cancelling exams, delaying exams or administering the exams in a modified format, such as online. We asked, what other forms of summative assessment might have been suitable during the pandemic?

The suspension of provincial exams in Newfoundland and Labrador (referred to locally as "public exams") gave us pause. In the 2020-2021 school year, schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, returned to in-person learning, however, provincial exams remained cancelled, and it was expected that teachers would create summative assessments in lieu of these exams. This context placed a spotlight on summative assessments designed by teachers. In June 2021, two of us, Carolyn and Jo Anne, were educators working with Grade 11 and 12 students in different schools in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. The third researcher, Steven, was also an educator, but worked in another province. We all had similar questions about summative assessment. As both educators and researchers, we were interested in learning more about students' ideas for their summative assessments.

The Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (2017a) equates summative assessment with an assessment of learning and defines it as follows:

> Assessment of learning (summative assessment): Assessment of learning is summative in nature. It involves strategies to confirm what students know and to demonstrate if students have met curriculum outcomes at important points in time. It typically comes at the end of a course or program to determine the extent to which the learning outcomes have been achieved. Examples include (but are not limited to) projects, performances, presentations, tests, and provincial assessments. (p. 4)

With provincial exams no longer an option, teachers were tasked with creating other forms of summative assessments for students in their courses.

As Stiggins and Chappuis (2006) suggest, we should be including students in our assessment planning, and the pandemic provided an ideal time to listen to their thoughts. We learned from classroom conversations that students had insightful perspectives about assessments. We learned of their insecurities and concerns regarding how changes in summative assessments during the pandemic would impact their educational futures. In this unprecedented context, we listened to students' voices in our classrooms concerning summative assessment and what we heard caused us to reflect on our research question. We began to wonder what advice students might have for teachers regarding summative assessments. Thus, student voice, in terms of what students were saying and how we came to attend to it differently from before, came to be a motivating factor for this research. As a result, we modified our original research question slightly to include student perspectives and asked, what other forms of summative assessment might have been suitable during the pandemic including those expressed by students?

To address our research question, we designed a mixed method study. In June 2021, we conducted a survey with Grade 11 and 12 students in two rural Newfoundland and Labrador schools where each of the two researchers in this province were working.[1] The results of the survey helped us formulate questions for focus groups with selected students who participated in the survey. Focus groups met in June 2021 as teachers and students prepared for the summative assessment that would occur at the end of their courses. The data analysis identified students' views about summative assessments including what they deemed to be worthy of being assessed. The findings of the study have implications for curricula and assessment policies.

To appreciate the context of our study, we discuss four factors that had an impact on students' summative assessments in June 2021, in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. The first factor we discuss is how Newfoundland and Labrador's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development approached summative assessment during the pandemic. The second factor is the alternative forms of summative assessment used by teachers in place of the provincial exams. The third factor is the influence online learning had on the design of alternative summative assessments. The final factor is the heightened role of formative assessments and students' role in them during that timeframe.

All four factors influenced the ways in which teachers and students thought about summative assessments during the pandemic. Following a review of these factors, we outline the design of our study, detail and discuss our findings then draw our conclusions.

Newfoundland and Labrador's Approach to Summative Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, provincial exams were administered in specific secondary courses and the results were used to determine 40% of the students' overall final grade in that course (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2021). The pre-pandemic provincial exams were formal, supervised, written and timed exams that would last three hours for each of the specified courses (Newfoundland and Labrador English School District, 2017b). The content of the provincial exams was determined by the provincial Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The results of the exam were used for both individual student evaluation as well as program evaluation.

However, provincial exams, as a form of summative assessment, were cancelled in the 2019–2020 school year (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020). This was a common practice across the country. They were replaced with what Cooper et al. (2022) call "emergency assessment[s]":

[1] Steven was on a deferred leave at the time of our data collection. While he was instrumental in the design and analysis portions of our study, he was not able to collect data because he did not have access to his school or to students.

> Emergency assessment, as we have come to understand it, is about a rapid response to an evolving and changing context. During the pandemic, this has meant the necessity to transition assessment quickly to online platforms. Further, and perhaps more importantly, it has meant the displacement of summative and large-scale assessments in favour of formative and teacher-constructed assessments for student learning. (p. 547)

The provincial exams continued to be cancelled during the 2020-2021 school year. Schools, however, did return to in-person learning (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2020). While this period could no longer be defined as one for "emergency assessment", it was still expected that "teachers continue to be responsible for assessing the [summative] progress of students" (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2020, n.p.). This meant that beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, teachers had more autonomy to design their own summative assessments to meet the needs of their students.

In 2023, a new form of provincial summative assessment was announced which the ministry scheduled to introduce during the 2025-2026 academic year. These new summative assessments will be computer-based modular evaluations that will take place three times during the school year. Students will also have the opportunity to retake these "modular exams" to improve their grade (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2023). Anticipating these future "modular exams", the pandemic, in effect, created a five-year gap, 2020-2025 in Newfoundland and Labrador's history of provincial exams for secondary students. (See Table 1 for a summary of this timeline.)

Our research occurred early on in this gap, in June 2021, when teachers were asked to individually create their own summative assessments for their courses.

Table 1

Recent Timeline of Provincial Exams in Newfoundland and Labrador

2019-2020	2020-2021 to 2024-2025	2025-2026
Provincial exams are cancelled, and all other summative assessments are not permitted after March 13, the final day of classes prior to schools being closed due to the pandemic. This was a period of "emergency assessment".	Provincial exams are cancelled and instead teachers must create other summative assessments. This is a timeframe when teachers design various forms of summative assessments.	Provincial exams reinstated in the form of modular exams for identified courses. This will begin a period of provincially designed summative assessment in the form of digital exams.

Forms of Summative Assessment

Traditionally, summative assessment has stressed paper and pencil tasks, such as tests and examinations, to determine a numerical score to represent the extent of a student's learning. Such traditional assessment practices typically promoted teacher-determined knowledges and skills (Lissitz & Schafer, 2002; Popham, 2002; Stiggins, 2001). However, as new skills and literacies were introduced into the curricula to reflect the changing times, assessment policies also aimed to keep up (Barrell, 1999).

In the Newfoundland and Labrador public education system, assessment policies are created by the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District to provide teachers with direction regarding expected assessment practices. These expectations include policies and regulations that are implemented in conjunction with any assessment direction provided in curricula documents.[2] Typically, teachers are encouraged through these assessment policies to use more diverse ways of assessing students. While traditional assessment practices, such as tests and essays may be useful for assessing students' abilities to read and write, other assessment practices are required to assess students' speaking, listening, viewing and representing abilities in the Newfoundland and Labrador English classroom (Newfoundland and Labrador Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015).

These expansions in the ways students are assessed in classrooms are commonly found in assessment policies (Van Zoost, 2011). The Newfoundland and Labrador English School District Assessment Policy, for example, explains that summative assessment formats could include projects, performances, presentations and tests (Newfoundland and Labrador English School District, 2017a). Other possibilities for summative assessments might include portfolios and oral examinations (Burke, et al., 2002; Sayre, 2014). When the provincial exams were cancelled, teachers needed to decide which form of summative assessment would best suit their course as well as their students.

Online Assessments

As students prepared for the summative assessments designed by their teachers in June 2021, they also had to "pivot" from in-person summative assessments held in their classrooms to the possibility of these same assessments being conducted online due to COVID-19 school closures. This also meant that teachers needed to prepare summative assessments that could be quickly adapted for online learning environments.

Stiggins (2018) claims that better assessment requires better teacher assessment literacy. Yet, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were challenged to adapt their assessment practices for online learning with little or no training. Fisher et al. (2020), in response to the onset of online learning during the pandemic, suggested that teachers create interactive videos and use

[2] The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is responsible for both curriculum and evaluations; it also establishes and oversees the implementation of provincial exams.

commercially produced intelligent tutoring systems (ITS), such as AutoTutor, Cognitive Tutor or ALEKS, for teaching and assessment tasks. They also noted that professional learning on the part of teachers would be needed to implement these suggestions as they required success criteria to have been previously established. Elaborating on the merits of having success criteria identified, Fisher et al. (2020) stated that with these tools, they could "identify features on [their] learning management system that enhance summative evaluation experiences" and that they could "determine the feasibility and authenticity of [their] current grading procedures in a distance learning setting" (p. 166). Notwithstanding the need for success criteria to be in place, Fisher et al. (2020) assumed that teachers had access to the professional learning and commercial resources required to create these summative assessments that were suitable for online tasks and formats. Coombs (2021) reminds us that "assessment literacy is a context-dependent professional competency" (p. 72). Thus, in the context of COVID-19, teachers had to not only adapt their assessment practices for online learning and contend with changing assessment policy guidelines but also manage all this using the professional competencies they had before the pandemic. Appreciating these demanding conditions, teachers were given great autonomy in designing online assessment experiences.

Throughout the pandemic school year of 2020-2021, Newfoundland and Labrador students experienced both in-person and online assessment practices. Students may have also experienced traditional assessment in new formats as "paper and pencil" tests and essays were converted into online Google Classroom quizzes and assignments. In June 2021, as teachers determined which form of summative assessment they would create and use at the end of their courses, they needed to be mindful that what they created could be quickly adapted for online environments. Students, too, were aware that their summative assessments might either be conducted in-person or online.

Formative Assessment and the Increased Role of Students

In the early stages of the pandemic and specifically during the period of "emergency assessment", there was a systemic "refocusing of assessment priorities towards classroom-based formative assessment . . . as the focal source of evidence for student learning" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 534). "Formative" assessment as defined by the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (2017a) is equated with assessment "for" learning as follows:

> Assessment for learning (formative assessment): Teachers use evidence to determine what students understand in order to plan and guide instruction and provide helpful feedback to students. It involves frequent, interactive assessments designed to make student understanding visible. This enables the teacher to identify learning needs and adjust teaching accordingly. It is an ongoing process of teaching and learning. Examples of formative assessment include (but are not limited to) teacher observations, homework, work samples, tests, assignments and projects. (p. 3)

During the period of "emergency assessment", students experienced the heightened role formative assessment played in their general and overall assessment. For example, Veugen et al. (2022) reported that many teachers in their study of 50 secondary teachers implemented new formative assessment strategies during the early stages of the pandemic and they did this more frequently than they would have in their pre-COVID-19, in-person classroom.

Formative assessment and the involvement of students in their own assessment experiences aligns with a learner-centered paradigm that increases learner agency (Martin, 2018, 2021; Stiggins, 2008). In learner-centered approaches students are "given control over their learning pathways and so they are required to be active agents throughout the educational process" (Santana-Martel & Garcías, 2022, p. 2). Such formative assessments might include self-assessment, peer assessment, or conferencing[3] (Cooper & Catania, 2010; Gregory et al., 2011a, 2011b). In an online environment, formative assessments are often more interactive and may include activities, such as virtual exit slips,[4] virtual retellings and polling to respond to questions (Fisher et al., 2020).

Increasing student agency in students' formative assessments also involves inviting them to make choices about what content and learner tools "amplify interests, passions, and strengths" (Murray, 2019, p.104). Such increased learner agency lends itself to authentic assessment opportunities "that demonstrate whether a student's knowledge and skill can be applied outside of the classroom. These assessments focus on real-world scenarios and often help drive the [learning] experience" (Murray, 2019, p. 106). Making assessments, both formative and summative, connected to students' lived experiences outside of the classroom is an important aspect of learner-centered education frameworks (Martin, 2018, 2021). Furthermore, belief in student-centered assessment encourages educators to work with students in co-designing assessment tasks and in aligning them with inquiry-based and project-based learning (Mackenzie, 2021; Zemelman, 2016). These assessments are often connected to authentic or meaningful tasks. The students involved in this research experienced a focus on student engagement and agency that informed their formative assessments during the early pandemic and, as a result, encouraged them to consider how assessment experiences connected to their lives beyond school.

Making the assessment terrain even more complex in an online learning environment was the expectation for teachers to know their students and recognize their work without them being physically present. For this reason, Fisher et al. (2020) recommended that teachers "make sure every live [online] session includes whole group and small group discussions" (p. 60). In this way teachers can document what their students know and can do, not only from the products that are produced (such as, quizzes, essays, portfolios), but also from their observations of and conversations with

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3 Conferencing refers to a conversation between a teacher and a learner to discuss learning progress and next steps for moving forward.

4 Exit slips refer to students' written responses to questions teachers ask at the end of a lesson or a class, which informally check their understanding.

students (Davies, 2011). The use of observations and conversations also allows teachers to verify the consistency and quality of products that a student submits. While the use of student discussions has frequently been used for either instructional purposes or to demonstrate a curriculum outcome, observing students' discussions for assessment is not new to teachers (Larons, 2000). In literacy education, planned discussion formats such as Literature Circles or Socratic Circles are just two examples used by teachers to assess students.

Alternatively, oral assessments, such as conferences, interviews, or oral questioning, are also used for summative assessments (Cooper & Catania, 2010). Additionally, as the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2023) suggests, in online environments, teachers can interview students to track their learning or ask students to "record themselves presenting summaries of their learning for the teacher to view individually" (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 161). The increased use of formative assessments and in-class discussions during COVID-19, also increased an understanding by students that learning is interactive. They now "recognise strategies like questioning and feedback as everyday or routine" (Arnold, 2022, p. 26). This increased use and reliance on interactive or discussion-based formative assessments during the pandemic became part of the context in which the students involved in our research in June 2021 offered ideas and expectations about their assessments, including their summative assessments.

The Study

As outlined in the sections above, the context of our research was influenced by four factors. It was in this June 2021 context that we, as teachers, had to design summative assessments for the end of our courses. We chose to listen to what students had to say about their expectations and ideas for these summative assessments. While recent research has focused on student voice in pedagogy and classroom practices, there are few studies specifically investigating student voice regarding summative assessment (Baroutsis et al., 2016; Skerritt et al., 2021). Willis et al.'s (2023) recent study is one. It examined how Australian secondary school students' insights into assessment might be used to transform school assessment culture. Regarding student agency, these researchers reported that:

> Students did not have the agency to make changes to the frequency of tests. Yet collectively students had achievable suggestions for ways to make assessment more manageable and additional insights, such as impacts on wellbeing. The frequency of assessment comments by students about fairness, time pressures and the emotions in annotations gave additional motivation to leaders to act. (pp. 17-18)

With a similar intent to learn from students' ideas, our research aimed to capture the experiences and advice of students as they, along with their teachers, navigated the changing landscape of summative assessment in rural Newfoundland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethics Approval

Gaining the approval of the Newfoundland and Labrador's English School District's Research Review Ethics Committee was necessary before pursuing this study. Following the approval of the ethics committee, we, as administrators and teachers, were given immediate access to the sites for our research.

As Grade 11 and 12 students were our focal groups, we received signed consent from parents/guardians for students to participate. All students who participated also gave informed consent. It was explained to them that the research hoped to gain an improved understanding of student choice and voice in classroom assessments.

Participant Selection and Study Setup

Research was conducted in two rural communities in Newfoundland. Newfoundland is the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador located on the eastern coast of Canada. The two communities in this study were differentiated by geographical area but similar in socio-economic status and consisted mainly of working-class families. The two schools housed Kindergarten to Grade 12 and were of similar size, each having a population of approximately 250-300 students. All Grade 11 and Grade 12 students in both schools were invited to participate in our study. The students in these grade levels would have been the students to have had formal provincial examinations. Examinations would have been for all students taking Grade 12 courses, some of which would have been Grade 11 students.

The research involved a mixed methods approach. We used surveys and focus group sessions to generate data. Creswell (2009) describes this approach as having sequential mixed methods procedures where "the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method" (p. 31). Initially, all participants completed a survey using Google Forms. They were informed that by agreeing and participating in the survey, they might be asked to be part of a small focus group session with five or six of their peers. Students were also informed that focus group sessions would be recorded and that their responses might be directly quoted or summarized in our research reports. However, it was made clear to them, that all would remain anonymous to anyone outside the group and that pseudonyms would be used when reporting. They understood that they did not have to answer all questions and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Most important for students was the understanding that participation in the study would in no way influence their grades for any course. After the completion of the initial Google survey, five students were invited to participate in one focus group and six in the other.

Diversity of the students was considered for the focus group, and participants were selected to represent different genders, backgrounds and a range of academic abilities. All students who participated, however, were studying in the academic/advanced stream. This was a deliberate choice on our part, as students studying in the general stream do not write formal year-end exams and would not have been familiar with Newfoundland and Labrador's year-end examination expectations. It is also worth mentioning that the focus group sessions occurred in June, a time when summative

assessment was at the forefront of students' thinking and conversations. As many of the participants were thinking about attending post-secondary institutions in the fall, they were engaging in conversations regarding the cancellation of summative assessments for the second time in as many years.

The Survey

The initial survey consisted of five questions regarding student views on assessment (see Table 2). Questions were answered using the following rating scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly agree.

There were also four open-ended questions for participants to write about their views on assessment. Forty-four responses were received in total. Twenty-two were received from Grade 11 students and 22 were received from Grade 12 students.

Table 2

Survey Questions

Survey Questions
The statements below will be completed according to the following rating scale (Strongly Agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Strongly Disagree): 1. Teachers hear my voice concerning classroom assessment. 2. My grades reflect my abilities. 3. I have a choice in how I present my learning on assessments. 4. There are opportunities for my personal ways of learning during assessments. 5. My voice is valued in the creation of classroom assessments. The following will be answered with written responses: 1. How does assessment support your learning? 2. What types of assessment (e.g., written, oral, performance, digital) would better support your learning? 3. Who is the primary user of your assessment? 4. Is there anything else that you would like to say about classroom assessment that was not included in this survey?

Focus Groups

The data were correlated from the survey and used only to inform the questions formulated for the focus group sessions. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

Focus Groups

Focus Group Questions
1. Tell me about your favourite assessment experience. a) Where were you? b) Who were you with? c) What words were said? d) How did you feel? Draw a representation of that assessment on your q-card.
2. What advice would you give to teachers about using traditional assessments? (For example, . . . tests, quizzes, final exams, public exams)
3. How could assessments be more creative to show your learning?
4. In an ideal world where you could have input into how you are assessed, what would that look like?
5. How could assessments be fairer to you?
6. What would make assessment more meaningful to your life beyond school?
7. What meaning do you make of this first pie chart? a) What does this mean? b) Why is this? c) How would you interpret this data?
8. What else about assessment, that hasn't been said, would you like to share with us?

While we considered having individual interviews, we opted for focus groups because they can help researchers maximize data generation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). The focus group sessions allowed for open discussion among students and provided an effective means for us, as researchers, to learn students' opinions and beliefs regarding assessment. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2004), focus groups are ideal "for accessing alternative points of view, [and] for obtaining insights into group consensus or divergence on an issue" (p. 208) which we also wanted to examine.

One focus group session was conducted in each of the two schools (School 1 and School 2). Sessions with each group were held near the end of the school year, were informal and casual and lasted approximately one hour. During the session, a set of eight open-ended questions were used. The prepared set of questions did not limit the conversation but were used merely as entry points into conversation. During the focus group sessions, we gave students an opportunity to review the survey data; however, they did not have an opportunity to review transcript data from the focus

groups due to time constraints imposed by the transcription process that made it unfeasible to have a second meeting with each group before the end of the school year. We acknowledge that students knew us as teachers and administrators, and that this could have possibly influenced their responses to some questions. To offset this, we also knew, that our positive relationships with the students might have made them more comfortable and open with their comments. The focus group setting allowed for the natural flow of conversation amongst students. It also allowed the informants to hear the opinions of others, which helped generate more ideas and comments (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Both focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. According to Creswell (2012), transcripts of such recordings, based on standardized conventions, provide an excellent record of naturally occurring interactions. This was our goal with the student focus groups.

Analysis Method

All transcripts were read and re-read individually by all three researchers. We began the process of data analysis independently. We each summarized, coded, and broke down the data into themes and categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), then came together to discuss the themes identified. The reading of, and reflection on, focus group data served as "a process of resolving data into its constituent components to reveal their characteristic themes and patterns" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 8). The themes identified served as the starting point for interpretation and analysis. Figure 1 identifies the focus group themes and illustrates their relative importance by font size.

Figure 1

Word Frequency

Findings

The sections below discuss each area identified by students in detail.

Having Agency and Choice

A strong theme in the data were the students' desire to have and be able to make choices in a summative assessment. The students consistently reported that their favourite assessments involved choices in how they communicated what they knew or were able to do. Table 4 identifies the phrases they used to indicate this.

Table 4

Students' Phrases for Describing Choice

different options
different ways to communicate your understanding
different ways to convey your information in your answers
given a choice
given so many options to work with
more choice
more options
multiple different options
wide variety of way[s] to communicate how you know things

Students noted that differences in the way they learned were stressed by their teachers, but this did not always carry over to assessments. In the focus group with School 1, when students were responding to the question: In an ideal world where you could have input into how you are assessed, what would that look like? Sophie answered saying that, "There needs to be more choice with a lot of things because . . ." and Chase quickly added "Cause not everyone learns the same and we're always told that but then in application it doesn't end up coming out like that . . ."

When students were able to exercise choice in assessments, choices allowed them to use their strengths to demonstrate what they knew. In the focus group with School 2, students commented on the benefits of choice saying:

> Louise: Yeah, [in] a lot of final projects, (we just did one in social studies and we did one in English) . . . we were given essays, bird houses, mind maps, poster boards, Bristol boards, photo essays . . . [And] like Stephanie said, we were given so many options to work with it. It played with everyone's strengths. I know two people in the class made a bird house that was sustainable, that fit our curriculum. Obviously, that was one of their strengths which is why they did that. Other people took photos and wrote essays which is really fair because it played to their strengths. It gave a variety.

> Stephanie: That makes me think of Biology. We were told to create a game, which was edgy, on the subject. One person chose to write an essay which most people thought was insane and why would you do that, but maybe that was better for them.
>
> Brian: That project you are talking about there, I really liked that where we were talking about the endocrine and different systems in the body and the different glands and the associated hormones. I did my project with a model. I carved a pancreas model that secreted fluids and having to speak about what it did and show the way it worked. I got a decent mark on it because I could explain and show. That method of being able to talk about it and show the information and also, I guess the point of it is the different expressions and how you learn stuff.

Having various options to choose from in an assessment (such as writing an essay or making a model) allowed students to match an option with their own particular strengths or interests. While the limited space of classrooms pose challenges for teachers wanting to accommodate assessment through a multitude of media, we suggest that such projects might be displayed in common spaces in the school instead of the classroom. We also know that with such projects, teachers also assess students while interacting, observing and conferencing with them. Together, teachers and students can create success criteria for assessment projects that not only reflect the Departments/Ministries of Education benchmarks but also attend to students' desire to have assessment choices.

Arguably, by having choice, students are invested in the assessment. When students had greater opportunities to make choices about how they would demonstrate what they knew and could do, they had higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Routman 2018, 2023). Stephanie, from School 2, described the "beauty of choice" as a signal that they had increased agency.

Making Assessment "Personal"

Many students were keen to experience summative assessments that were also personal. Where "choice" is concerned with how students demonstrate what they are expected to know (writing an essay or creating a model), personal assessment experiences are concerned with the content that students create and share during an assessment. Making assessment personal for students frequently means that they want to be assessed on topics and ideas that interested them. In the focus group with School 2, students commented on what personal assessment would be like if they were involved in the creation of the assessment process:

> Researcher: In an ideal world where you could have input into how you are assessed, what would that look like?
>
> Mike: It would be on stuff that I am very interested in. So like if I am interested in planes or dinosaurs. I would want my test or assignment to be about the dinosaurs or the planes so I could remember it when I get older, when I go into post-secondary.
>
> Stephanie: I like it when teachers give you a chance to research something that is still on topic but like Mike said something that you find more interesting. Like I think in Biology we were on

genetics and we were told to go off and find an article that we found interesting. So yeah, I think finding these links between things you are interested in and the actual topic is a great way to learn.

One student in School 2 explained how making assessment personal allowed students to retain information better:

> Brian: I think we have touched on that one before, just having it tailored to your personal interests, you tend to retain the information more. In your life beyond school meaning either post-secondary or just remember it later on in life per se, when your assignment and your assessment is meaningful to you in terms of how you can convey it. You know you have that sense of it's your assessment. I feel like it does retain, it sticks with you more because it's your assessment. It's your work, not so much as it's schoolwork. It's not just something I regurgitate onto a page just to show that I understand it.

However, students also cautioned that there were obstacles to making assessment personal. When assessments expect students to use their personal experiences to answer a question, there was a danger that some students might not have the range of experiences necessary to do so. Such an approach fails to account for students' diversity in their experiences outside of school. As students from School 2 explained:

> Louise: Yeah, if you are going to ask someone to relate to something make sure everyone can relate to it. Like it's not necessarily fair to ask when was a time that your leadership was challenged because if you are a person that is passive and are not a leader in things how do you expect them to be oh this, and this, and this happened. If I was asked that question, I could say a sports example or something but if you are not into those things because you are passive, quiet and do not take a big stand it is completely unfair to ask that question.
>
> Brian: I just had that same question there; I am in that position you just said there. I made up that entire answer. It means nothing to me. I was just getting something on the paper.
>
> Mike: Like, "When was your first time cod fishing?" then you have to make up the whole trip about cod fishing that you never ever went on before.

Students understood that sharing what is "personal" in school has limitations and may encourage students to lie or create a fiction (such as with the cod fishing example). Students' identities in assessment practices could mistakenly be considered as "personal" or "authentic" when they are instead constituted by diverse discourses and the hidden effects of power that students experience during an assessment event (Van Zoost, 2008). One student in School 2 explained this problem as follows:

> Mike: When it says reflect back to your life, some people go home and they are a whole different person when they go home. Their parents are different. They are behind a closed door and you don't know what goes on behind closed doors so it is hard for you to reflect back to your life if you are having a rough life at home. And you can't do nothing. So when

people come to school they hide that so they don't need to show, well, "he had this or he had that".

Personalized assessment assumes that young people are 1) interested in making individual choices about sharing their lives beyond school; and 2) that young people have a great deal of freedom to make these choices. Such assessments ask students to make choices about what they want to share (e.g., a leadership scenario) or create (e.g., fictional anecdotes about cod fishing) and bring into the classroom and what they would leave out (e.g., a rough time at home).

Experiencing Authentic Learning

As educators, we often think and talk about authentic learning. Striving for student engagement and empowerment through choice and ownership of learning is often the goal. Students are more likely to feel engaged when teachers focus on their interests and allow those interests to be explored (Baroutsis et at., 2016). This shift in teaching and learning practices necessitates a shift in assessment practices (Van Zoost, 2011). For assessment to be truly authentic, it is crucial that students are actively engaged in their assessments not only their learning processes. Table 5 summarizes the common words and phrases that students used to describe the notion of authentic learning in relation to their assessments.

Table 5

Students' phrases for describing authentic learning

hands on learning
opportunities to apply what you know
connect learning to the real world
connect learning to real life
memorization is not an indication of learning
connect learning to students' interests
learn more from opinion-based questions

What emerged from the data were three related aspects of authentic learning: 1) "hands-on learning"; 2) applying knowledge; and 3) connecting assessment to real life and the real world.

Including "Hands-on" Learning

Students indicated that assessment should be "hands-on" and that they should have opportunities to apply knowledge they gained in class during assessments. They also acknowledged that it was more challenging to have hands-on learning this year because of COVID as Chase, from School 1, explained earlier. Hands-on learning and assessment were more often referenced in relation to science courses and courses with labs. Students in School 1 reported that hands-on learning helped increase their understanding of concepts and better prepared them for tests. Even though they talked about the benefits of "hands-on" learning, they consistently referred to

traditional assessments rather than other methods previously discussed.

> Jaxon: I think a good example that other courses can follow is what they did with the new science courses, chemistry, and biology and although we didn't get to do the new biology course . . . we got the new chemistry course and they cut out a lot . . . a nice bit of material and replaced with a whole bunch of labs.
>
> Sophie: Yes, and like that's more hands-on. Yeah, most definitely 'cause in chemistry you can't have an open discussion . . . 'cause like . . . what are you discussing . . . molecules.
>
> Chase: But with labs and stuff like that . . . that's a good preparation for the future too. A lot of different college and university programs [have] hands-on lab type things.
>
> Sophie: And a lot of people are more hands-on learners . . . like [when you're given] a book it might go in one ear out the other, but you put them in a lab they can write a test on it tomorrow and they understand exactly what they're doing.
>
> Layla: I learned a lot from labs too.

While these data show that students have a desire for learning through a hands-on approach, there was little evidence to suggest they wanted hands-on assessments. Assessments appeared limited to tests, quizzes, written assignments—those assessment events that are traditional in nature.

Applying What You Learn

Students from School 1 acknowledged that they learned much more when they had opportunities to apply their knowledge, rather than simply memorize information. While memorization may "stick" in short-term memory long enough to write a test, students recognized that they "don't remember a single thing about [concepts taught] a couple weeks later" (Lydia).

> Hudson: They stick for me at the time too . . . like I find those slides . . . like I understand them pretty easily but like I don't remember a single thing about them a couple weeks later . . . like after the test . . . I don't remember a thing.
>
> Jaxon: You got a point there too . . . I mean maybe I'm good at remembering that stuff.
>
> Hudson: In my short-term memory then sure but like next year I'm not going to remember a single thing···what we did in biology this year.

These data suggest that through application of knowledge, learning is enhanced, and students are often more engaged. Students recognized that when researching and investigating independently, learning is enriched and, in most cases, learning happened more easily.

> Sophie: Yeah, and you're researching it too. Like when we done independent research—you're finding it, you are understanding it yourself, you're putting it in your own words . . .
>
> Lydia: I like assessment where you apply what you just learned like that bug assessment . . .
>
> Layla: Yeah, that was good.

Lydia: We applied what we had learned previous to that and . . .

Sophie: We learn more from that than just doing worksheets.

Layla: It was something like that . . . colouring a bug . . . you learn more.

Chase: Everyone had to have a different bug, but we used the skills that we had just learned . . . put the theory into learning practice.

Hudson: That's what I was talking about when I say like teach you the basics like you learn how to apply what you learn rather than just memorize.

In those data, students recognize their strengths and are provided opportunities to apply their knowledge and to demonstrate learning. Applying what they learn is valued by students more than the memorization of knowledge.

Connecting to Real Life and the Real World

Students recognized the need for learning to be connected to real life and to the real world. Students from School 1 indicated that in math, the teacher discussed with them how math connected to the real world and this connection was also reflected in the math assessment. Having a connection to real life helped students understand the purpose for learning and increased their engagement.

Chase: I don't love math or anything assessment wise but that is a good thing about math assessment. It's usually . . . here's what it is . . . this is how you are going to use it. Go do it now . . . you know.

Sophie: Applying . . . yes . . . this is how you use it.

Hudson: Especially in like calculus like she showed us how we're going to use some of that stuff in the real world.

Chase: Which helps to keep me interested. She's like going a little bit above what she needs to do.

Hudson: That's the part I understood the best about the derivatives or whatever unit that was.

As Sophie in School 1 described, she liked the explicitness of one teacher's description of how mathematics connected to real life situations. It showed that students appreciate when they are provided information that connects learning to practical life events.

Sophie: Or she would tell you like . . . well this is how you would do this in your real life. Like when we were doing like derivatives the last unit . . . she was like oh like if you were to go to the bank and looking at this like this is how you would use this to figure out your loan or whatever and like it was really . . . it made it more interesting for us because we were like . . . oh, that is how you use this.

Connecting assessment to real life and the real world was important to students, as was "hand-on learning" and applying their knowledge. Together, these three aspects define what students considered to be authentic about their learning experiences.

Valuing Classroom Discussion as Assessment

Students from both focus groups spoke repeatedly and consistently about the importance of discussions as a means of maximizing the efficacy of their learning and assessments. Table 6 summarizes the common words and phrases that students used to describe their notions of discussion as it related to their assessments.

Table 6

Students' Phrases for Describing Thoughts on Discussion

I wish we got more discussions
I prefer oral interviews
You could use your voice to get marks
Discussions are good for learning
Some students don't know how to put their words on paper
Talking in front of people gives you confidence
You would think that [discussion] would be more of a thing

Students acknowledged that incorporating discussion into everyday learning is beneficial to them. It helped them to build confidence in their interactions with others while showcasing their learning. The learning was much more meaningful to them when they had discussions about their learning with other students and teachers. Students echoed what Larson's (2000) research on discussion already suggested. Discussions allow students opportunities to connect what they learn in school to their own life and to interact with various subjects they are learning about (Larson, 2000). Discussions can keep students focused and engaged in the learning so that it can be a meaningful form of assessment. As students from School 1 explained:

> Lydia: [When an educator] points to somebody to say what's your view on this. And if you didn't respond you didn't get the mark for that, but I guess that's like participation, discussion, but I think that's valid . . . how do you feel about this? . . . I love discussion.
>
> Chase: It also cuts back on like people being there but checked out . . . you have to be actively listening to like take part in the discussions.
>
> Layla: Discussions are good for learning.

Thus, students understood that good discussion involved active participation from all and prevented those not participating from "checking out". Students understood that talking to people is different than talking with people.

Students expressed the concerns and benefits from having open discussions in the classroom. Unfortunately, while students expressed their support of learning through discussion, students in School 1 also noted that discussion was not happening nearly as much as they wanted.

> Sophie: But like any other courses, like any of your core subjects, you don't get to do that [have discussions]. Like I don't think I ever, in all of high school, sat down and had like an open discussion, where you just bring your views and your points. We have not done that.
>
> Chase: You think that would be more of a thing.
>
> Sophie: If you ask most of us what we done in like Grade 8 religion with [Teacher] . . . a lot of us could probably tell you 'cause it was all open book, open discussion. It was interesting.

The evidence indicates that students want more discussions in their classrooms.

Discussion

This research shows that students had strong opinions about the assessments they experienced during the pandemic. Students had vested interest and opinions about how they were assessed, as well as how they could have been more involved in summative assessment practices. Martin (2018) reminds us that:

> we can't control the learners and simultaneously expect them to be motivated without the opportunities to exert agency in the learning process. Agency comes from the power to act and requires learners to have the ability to make decisions and take ownership of their own behaviors in the process. (pp.108-109)

Our findings about agency and choice remind educators that while agency is important for fostering intrinsic motivation and students' taking "ownership" of their learning, choice in assessment events is often limited. It is limited by curriculum outcomes, by the possibilities made on offer from the teacher and by the interests and abilities of students to take up such offers. Educators need to acknowledge that their students feel "empowered" by their choices.

While the literature encourages increased student involvement in assessment, assessment policies also encourage the active role of students in their assessments. Students in this study were not often invited or asked for input into the summative assessments they experienced. A limitation of our study was, without a doubt, our focus on students' perspectives to the exclusion of teacher perspectives on the same topics. Further research could explore teachers' perspective about systemic barriers for implementing student-involved assessment practices. This should probably include barriers created by online grade books that synchronously report assessment to students and parents in the form of numerical scores. Considering Skerritt's et al. (2021) claim that "teachers can find student voice threatening" (p. 958), we think it would also be interesting to study how numerical scores might devalue the efforts of assessment events that involve students in co-constructing options and flexible pathways for their own learning.

Students in this research made a clear call for an increased variety in the kinds of summative assessments they experienced. While students reported that their teachers understood their needs

for diverse approaches to learning, they did not, however, apply this need for diverse approaches to assessments. There was a disconnect between instructional practices and assessment practices in terms of providing options or choice for students. This research signals a possible gap between assessment policies and curricula. Specifically, it suggests a gap in how teaching and assessment may create challenges for teachers in implementing a variety of assessments.

Concluding Thoughts

Students spoke about four different aspects of assessment that were important to them. They wanted increased agency in making choices about how they demonstrated their knowledge and skills. They called for summative assessments that were able to address their personal differences and strengths. They were interested in assessments that were authentic. To them, this meant hands-on learning that was applicable and connected to their lived experiences. Finally, they called for an increase role of discussions in assessment. While students were the primary stakeholder in this study, the research may be helpful to all education stakeholders in that it provides data that may inform assessment policy in classrooms, schools and the ministries/departments of education.

These calls are consistent with Stiggins' (2008) vision of students who are highly involved in their assessment practices This vision has implications for the role of educators in assessment. We have identified four ways in which curricula and assessment policies would need to change and be more explicitly connected to each other. Curricula and assessment policies would need to identify how teachers can:

1. partner with students in their learning and assessment to promote student agency and choice;
2. help learners connect curricular expectations with students' personal strengths and interests;
3. activate students' learning by co-designing assessment tasks that are meaningful for students;
4. find ways to incorporate student discussions and student input during assessments.

The students in this study were ready for such a change. They envisioned these educational changes based on their experiences in the school system during the pandemic. If our educational systems and policies were not fully ready to embrace the call from the pre-pandemic assessment literature to involve students in assessment events, perhaps the students' voices in this research might further encourage teachers and the systems they work in to embrace such change in post-pandemic assessment literacies and practices.

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