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# Assessing Student Learning: A U.S./U.K. International Comparative Study

Kristin Anne Garaas-Johnson

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ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING: A U.S./U.K. INTERNATIONAL  
COMPARATIVE STUDY

by

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Bachelor of Science, North Dakota State University, 1999  
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Education


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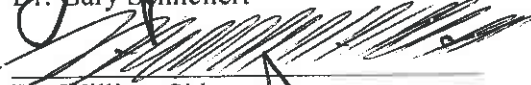
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This dissertation, submitted by Kristin Garaas-Johnson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

  
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Dean of the Graduate School

May 7, 2014  
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Kristin Garaas-Johnson  
April 29, 2014

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	x
ABSTRACT .....	xii
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
United States Educational Reform.....	1
United Kingdom Educational Reform .....	5
Statement of the Problem.....	9
Purpose of the Study .....	12
Importance of the Study.....	12
Research Questions.....	12
Conceptual Framework.....	13
Definition of Terms.....	16
Assumptions.....	22
Delimitations.....	22
Organization of the Study .....	22
II.    LITERATURE REVIEW .....	23
Historical Review of Assessment and Educational Reform .....	24

	Assessment-Directed Curriculum .....	40
	Establishing Balanced Assessments for Validity in Accountability.....	60
III.	METHODS .....	63
	A Qualitative Study.....	64
	Researcher’s Background .....	64
	Topic Selection .....	66
	Research Questions.....	68
	Interview Questions .....	69
	Site Selection .....	70
	Participant Selection .....	73
	Data Collection .....	75
	Data Analysis .....	77
	Validity .....	80
	Researcher Subjectivities and Ethics .....	81
IV.	RESULTS .....	83
	Introduction.....	83
	Data Interpretation .....	84
	North Dakota Results.....	87
	Surrey, England Results.....	118
	Summary.....	138
V.	THEORETICAL ANALYSIS .....	139
	Introduction.....	139
	Theoretical Analysis .....	140

	Summary.....	151
VI.	DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....	152
	Introduction.....	152
	Overview of This Study .....	152
	Discussion.....	156
	Implications.....	164
	Summary.....	172
	APPENDICES .....	173
	REFERENCES .....	183



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 A Conceptual Framework for the Assessment Process .....	15
3.1 The Transitional Process for Moving From Codes to Assertions.....	79
5.1 The North Dakota Matrix.....	141
5.2 The Surrey, England Matrix .....	147

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 Overview of Educational Reform in the United States.....	4
1.2 Overview of Educational Reform in the United Kingdom.....	8
1.3 English Language Arts Content Standard Comparison.....	11
2.1 Key Stages of Students' Level of Academic Achievement.....	35
4.1 North Dakota Participants.....	89
4.2 North Dakota Codes, Categories, Themes, and Assertions.....	91
4.3 Common Educational Themes Referenced among North Dakota Participants.....	99
4.4 Surrey, England Participants.....	120
4.5 Surrey, England Codes, Categories, Themes, and Assertions.....	121
4.6 Common Educational Themes Referenced among Surrey Participants.....	122
6.1 North Dakota Analysis of the Assessment Process.....	155
6.2 Surrey, England Analysis of the Assessment Process.....	155

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of assessments of student learning in the United States, specifically a school system in North Dakota, comparatively to that of a school system in Surrey, England. Using a conceptual framework that is influenced by the work of Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis with the Assessment Training Institute (2011) and the Assessment Reform Group (2002) on creating effective, balanced assessments for learning, three questions guided my study:

1. What are secondary (students ages 14-18) educators' beliefs about what, why, how, and for whom school systems are assessing students' learning?
2. What is the difference between educators' beliefs about assessment and the processes in which they assess students' learning?
3. Do educators perceive a balance of assessments of students' learning?

Through a qualitative approach, I analyzed educators' experiences and perspectives on the role of assessments in establishing valid and meaningful instruction on a standardized curriculum that is tied to student, teacher, and school system accountability. By creating two matrices in which I considered the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions in the process of assessing students' learning at both "Greenbriar High School" in North Dakota and at "Whitmoor College" in Surrey, England, I was better able to conceptualize the school-wide processes in which educators assess students' learning—the actions, interactions, and consequences of these assessments reflect my three assertions that educators assess students' learning for standardization, systemization, and accountability.

This process also helped me to more accurately interpret my data by analyzing the similarities and differences in the culture and climate of the assessment process between the two schools. The implications of my findings suggest school leaders must create a unified goal for school improvement, establish and oversee a comprehensive action plan, and provide differentiated professional development to foster a system that supports balanced assessments.

*Keywords:* education standards, curriculum, assessment, international, accountability

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the inception of compulsory schooling in the 1830s (based on the Prussian model of education), most of the Western World has embraced educational reform. This study examines the influences of educational reform on assessing students' learning in two locales: North Dakota, U.S.A. and Surrey, England. To provide context for current educational reform efforts in each locale of this study, this chapter will discuss the history of reform in both the United States and England.

#### **United States Educational Reform**

When Thomas Mann developed compulsory schooling in Massachusetts, he decidedly wanted to ensure the safety and security of citizens by providing a free education to white students (especially immigrants who were in need of cultural commonality), to establish a qualified profession through effective training, and to increase statewide control over local schools (Church, 1976). While there were several attempts to reform education at the state-level, the first notable push for reform in the United States may be traced to the Harvard Committee of Ten's (National Education Association of the United States, 1893) influence on high school graduation requirements (by enforcing strict higher education entrance requirements), or to the rise of the vocational education movement with the Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act of 1917 (during World War I). The advent of World War II, however, brought a perceived need to guarantee high school graduates were highly educated in math and science.

Documented in President Truman's (1947) report *Higher Education for American Democracy*, the country's higher educational system required more students who were qualified to enter college and a workforce that demanded a greater attention to math and science. With its release, the President declared:

. . . we are challenged by the need to insure that higher education shall take its proper place in our national effort to strengthen democracy at home and to improve our understanding of our friends and neighbors everywhere in the world . . . A carefully developed program to strengthen higher education, taken together with a program for the support of elementary and secondary education, will inevitably strengthen our Nation and enrich the lives of our citizens. (Truman, 1947)

With this statement and formal report, United States educational systems launched into a mindset of global competition and industriousness. In 1953, President Eisenhower continued this vision when he established the Department of Education, Health, and Welfare, to promote the general welfare of children and families and strengthen the government's role under the General Welfare Clause. A year later, the *Brown v. Board of Education* rocked schools across the country, with the ruling that "separate is not equal." While the United States struggled with the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, the Russian government launched the first satellite *Sputnik 1* in 1957. The nationwide outcry led to an increased attention to public schooling and President Eisenhower responded with the National Defense of Education Act (Eisenhower, 1958). Eisenhower, a republican, received some scrutiny over his plan from a public that feared the government was overstepping its bounds under Article 10 of the United States Constitution (states' rights). Eisenhower (1958) assured the nation:

This Act, which is an emergency undertaking to be terminated after four years, will in that time, do much to strengthen our American system of education so that it can meet the broad and increasing demands imposed upon it by considerations of basic national security.



While the Act was intended to cease after four years, the United States continues to emphasize the need for students to acquire specific knowledge and skills (especially in math and science) prior to high school graduation. Regardless of political affiliation, government policies continue to demand increased rigor and accountability (based on standards and outcomes) and increasingly attempt to provide equity within school systems as represented by Table 1.1. For example, policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) and Race to the Top (United States Department of Education, 2010b) and governmental reports including President Obama's *Blueprint for Reform* (United States Department of Education, 2010a) are designed to create a greater deal of accountability for the country's public school systems. Under NCLB legislation, school systems assess students yearly on summative, standardized tests as a means for receiving additional government aid. As the law is written, an increasing percentage of students within school districts must be "proficient" or achieve the expected level of mastery in order for schools to receive this funding. By the year 2014, all students, and all school districts are expected to earn the level of proficiency. Because many school districts are not experiencing the necessary gains in student improvement to meet these requirements (a moving benchmark), states requested an NCLB waiver in February, 2012. President Obama granted this request, and 26 states and Washington D.C. have agreed to comply with the waiver's requirements (that include comprehensive curricula such as the Common Core standards and a merit-based teacher compensation system) to draw up a comprehensive plan demonstrating school districts will continue to improve educational programs and strive to close perceived educational gaps. Though NCLB was scheduled for reauthorization in 2012, the United States government has yet to do so (United States Department of Education, 2013).

Table 1.1. Overview of Educational Reform in the United States.

Years	Leader	United States	
		Political Party	Educational Reform
1945-1953	Truman	Democrat	Higher Education for American Democracy, 1948
1953-1961	Eisenhower	Republican	Department of Education, Health, and Welfare, 1953; <i>Brown v. BOE</i> , 1954; Committee on Education Beyond the High School, 1956; National Defense Education Act, 1958
1961-1963	Kennedy	Democrat	Task Force on Education, 1960
1963-1969	Johnson	Democrat	Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965; Headstart, 1965
1969-1974	Nixon	Republican	Equal Educational Opportunities Act, 1974; Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 1974
1974-1977	Ford	Republican	Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975
1977-1979	Carter	Democrat	Protection of Pupil Right Amendment; Department of Education Organization Act, 1979
1981-1989	Reagan	Republican	<i>A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform</i> , 1983; Equal Access Act, 1984
1989-1993	G. H. W. Bush	Republican	Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Civil Rights Act, 1991
1993-2001	Clinton	Democrat	Improving American Schools Act, 1994; The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994
2001-2009	G. W. Bush	Republican	No Child Left Behind Act, 2001; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; <i>A Test of Leadership</i> , 2006
2009-2015	Obama	Democrat	<i>Blueprint for Reform</i> , 2010; Race to the Top, 2010; Common Core Standards, 2010

## **United Kingdom Educational Reform**

Similar to the United States, leadership in the United Kingdom was influenced by the Prussian educational model. The passage of the Elementary Education Act (1880), the United Kingdom also launched the compulsory schooling movement, providing a free education to students (ages 5-10) as an alternative to schooling provided by the Church of England. The Education Act (1902) created Local Education Authorities to oversee school funding and operations, and after World War I, the Fisher Education Act (1918) extended compulsory education to the age of fourteen (in more recent years, the Education and Skills Act (2008) extended the length of compulsory schooling to 18 years of age by 2015).

Comparable to the United States, the push for reform escalated after World War II under Prime Minister Churchill, when England established the Butler Education Act of 1944. Under this Act, the United Kingdom established a state-funded, tripartite educational system comprised of selective grammar schools, secondary-technical, and secondary-modern schools. Around the age of 11, after students had completed their coursework in a primary school, they took an assessment that placed them in either the selective grammar school (a college preparatory school), the secondary-technical school (a vocational education school), or a secondary-modern school (a comprehensive school). In 1965, Prime Minister Wilson's leadership released Circular 10/65, which ended the tripartite system's selection process after primary school—a move to eliminate separatism in the United Kingdom's secondary education. Echoing the desegregation of schools in the United States, the Labour party and its supporters in the United Kingdom wanted all schools to be comprehensive, affording all students the opportunity to earn the standard of education offered at the grammar school.

In 1970, under Conservative Prime Minister Heath, then Secretary of State Margaret Thatcher released Circular 10/70, which attempted to reclaim control for local educational authorities (LEAs) that did not approve of the country's push for comprehensive education. Thatcher, however, was scrutinized for doing so with few consultations. During a July 8 debate on the issue, she said, "It would not have been appropriate to enter into consultations. I believe that consultation is meaningful only if it is entered into in a state of mind where one intends to be influenced by the representations which are made" (Thatcher, 1970, para. 9).

Under Thatcher's leadership in 1981, the secretaries of state created "The School Curriculum" that outlined a national curriculum for all subjects, which would later become the English National Curriculum (Shimmon, 2010). Through this model, students receive a comprehensive, statutory education in core subjects including English, social studies, mathematics, and science, to sex education, religious education, physical education, technology, music and art (Department for Education, 2013e). While Circular 10/65 eliminated the separatism at the age of 11, students must take a series of assessments prior to their entrance into college or the workforce. Such assessments include Standardized Assessment Tests (SATs) in the core subjects of English/language arts, mathematics, and science during Key Stages 1, 2, and 3 (when a student is 7, 11, and 14 years of age). These assessments are externally and internally evaluated. During Key Stage 4, (around the age of 16), students take the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, which measure students' performance in a variety of academic areas outlined by the National Curriculum (these exams replaced the Ordinary-Level and Certificate of Secondary exams in 1986). These exams are required for students wishing

to extend their education in A-Level courses and are a means by which the public may gauge a students' college or career readiness.

While Thatcher may have received initial criticism for her changes to the nation's educational systems, both the Conservative and the Labour parties continue to establish increasing rigor and measures of accountability as part of a greater vision toward an outcome-based education that is geared toward individualized needs of students. For example, consider the recent policies and reports featured in Table 1.2, including *Every Child Matters*, 2003; the Children Act, 2004; and the Education and Skills Act, 2008. These reports and policies centralize around improving educational environments to provide accountability measures for reporting child abuse, truancy, and neglect.

Table 1.2. Overview of Educational Reform in the United Kingdom.

Years	Leader	United Kingdom Political Party	Educational Reform
1940-1945	Churchill	Conservative*	Butler Education Act, 1944
1945-1951	Attlee	Labour	
1951-1955	Churchill	Conservative	
1955-1957	Eden	Conservative	
1957-1963	MacMillan	Conservative	
1963-1964	Douglas-Home	Conservative	
1964-1970	Wilson	Labour	Circular 10/65, 1965
1970-1974	Heath	Conservative	Circular 10/70, 1970
1974-1976	Wilson	Labour	Direct Grant Grammar Schools Regulations, 1975; Education Act, 1976
1976-1979	Callaghan	Labour	Youth Opportunities Programme, 1978
1979-1990	Thatcher	Conservative	Assisted Places Scheme, 1980; Youth Training Scheme, 1983; National Vocational Qualifications, 1986; Education Reform Act, 1988; Children Act, 1989
1990-1997	Major	Conservative	Apprenticeships, 1994; Education Act, 1996
1997-2007	Blair	Labour	Education Act 1997; <i>Excellence in Schools</i> , 1997; Beacon Schools Programme, 1998; Teaching and Higher Education Act, 1998; School Standards and Frameworks Act, 1998; Curriculum 2000, 2000; Education Act, 2002; <i>Every Child Matters</i> , 2003; Children Act, 2004; Leading Edge Partnership Programme, 2005
2007-2010	Brown	Labour	Education and Skills Act, 2008
2010-	Cameron	Conservative*	New National Curriculum, 2014

\* Coalition Government, created during a wartime crisis for bipartisan support (rare for the United Kingdom).

## Statement of the Problem

Economic factors and political affiliations continue to influence educational reforms. As noted in Table 1.2, both the Labour and Conservative Parties struggle for control and oversight of educational initiatives. This effort is echoed in the United States. Comparable to Surrey's history prior to Circular 10/65, North Dakota legislators considered implementing a three-tiered educational system as recently as the 2009 Legislative Assembly through HB 1400 that promoted vocational and college-bound education (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2009). While some support the shift toward tiered educational systems in providing increased opportunities to tailor students' education and provide for apprenticeships, many cite the need for a more unified system under legislation such as Circular 10/65 and the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling due to a history of inequities (Bowles, 2000).

Sutton and Levinson (2001) posited, "Among public policy arenas, educational policy is unique in its power to determine who has the right to become an 'educated person,' as well as what bodies of knowledge and what cognitive skills count as properly educative" (p. 11). The influence of policies directed toward an outcome-based education in both the United States and the United Kingdom has resulted a greater emphasis on assessments—namely externally generated, standardized, summative assessments—as a means to gauge students' improvement (Au, 2008; 2011; Stiggins, 2007, 2008). School systems in the United States and the United Kingdom have established a curriculum based on state or national standards on which to assess students' learning through standardized tests and daily in-class activities for student, teacher, and school system accountability. Research shows that high-stakes standardized assessments

often are culturally biased and lack the ability to effectively measure students' abilities (Au, 2011; Guskey, 2007). Though educators continue to check for understanding through teacher-generated formative assessments (Assessment for Learning), school districts have increased their use of standardized, summative assessments. An increased emphasis on summative, standardized assessments conflicts with the role of formative assessments, and the resulting imbalance can potentially alter the decisions educators make within their classrooms (Stiggins, 2007, 2008). Often, students are not included in making decisions about the assessment process, or fully understand the need for assessment, furthering their inability to successfully perform (Clarke, 2010; Stiggins, 2008). Also, as a result of the outcome-based education movement, educational professionals question the adoption of business policies and practices by school systems in the form "partnerships" to establish market-based curricula, such as that of the Common Core (Ball & Youdell, 2003). In each respective locale, the English National Curriculum and statewide standard curricula—such as the Common Core Curriculum, to which 45 states and the District of Columbia will fully adopt by 2015 (Common Core State Standards Initiatives, 2012)—are the established expectation—to reiterate—the "bodies of knowledge and what cognitive skills count as properly educative" (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). National influences for increased literacy have reflected in set curricula for English Language Arts in both North Dakota, and Surrey, England (the two locales for this study). For example, Table 1.3 delineates just a handful of standards for each educational setting. Both Surrey and North Dakota highlight students' need to acquire skills in four areas: reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language usage. (Note: I have incorporated the language of the standards as closely as possible to provide a more accurate comparison. Also, at the time of this study, schools in North Dakota were



preparing for the transition to the Common Core and were beginning to implement them within their classrooms, so I have included them in this comparison.)

Table 1.3. English Language Arts Content Standard Comparison.

Common Core State Standards* (2010)	North Dakota State Standards (2002)	English National Curriculum (2007)
11-12.RL/RI.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	11.1. Students engage in the research process by evaluating and incorporating information from a variety of sources.	KS.4.1. There are a number of key concepts (competence, creativity, cultural understanding, and critical understanding) that underpin the study of English. Students need to understand these concepts in order to deepen and broaden their knowledge, skills, and understanding.
11-12.RL/RI.2. Determine two or more themes of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; create an objective summary of a text.	11.2. Students engage in the reading process by identifying characteristics of literary forms and genres, by evaluating literature based on cultural or historical contexts, and by analyzing biographies; political writings; and details, facts, and concepts of nonfiction genres.	KS.4.2. The essential skills and processes in English that students need to learn to make progress include speaking and listening, reading, and writing.
11-12. RI.7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information in different media or formats to address a question or solve a problem.	11.3. Students engage in the writing process by gathering information to support multiple sides of an issue, by organizing details according to purpose, and by using appropriate vocabulary and figurative language.	KS.4.3. The study of English should enable students to apply their knowledge, skills, and understanding to relevant real-world situations. For example students should prepare informal and formal presentations/debates for a variety of audiences and purposes.
11-12.W.1. Write arguments to support claims in analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.	11.4. Students engage in the speaking and listening process by analyzing and adjusting the message to suit the purpose in a variety of informal and formal situations.	KS.4.4. Students should be offered opportunities (such as meet and talk with other writers, read exemplar texts, and become involved in inspirational activities) that are integral to their learning and enhance their engagement with the concepts, processes, and content of the subject.
11-12.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	11.5. Students understand media by evaluating how coverage differs in content and accuracy according to format (i.e. radio, internet, television, etc.)	
11-12.SL.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.	11.6. Students use the conventions of grammar, usage, and punctuation to revise their work. Students apply sound patterns in language (i.e. alliteration, assonance, and consonance).	

### **Purpose of the Study**

Because many school systems measure students' performance on educational standards as a means for accountability, the purpose of this qualitative study will be to comparatively examine educator's beliefs and classroom observations of the assessment process in the United States (North Dakota) and the United Kingdom (Surrey, England). With the research of Assessment Training Institute (Pearson Education, 2013) (ATI) and the Assessment Reform Group (2002) (ARG) influencing my framework, I will draw recommendations for each school to improve their assessment processes based on my findings.

### **Importance of the Study**

The current educational climate maintains a focus on the need for educational reform. Globally, standardized assessments of students' learning have increasingly become an important tool in establishing accountability of students, teachers, and school systems. The goal of this study is to understand the educators' beliefs about the assessment process as a driving force in decision making. These perceptions may provide clarity for educators in both the United States and the United Kingdom in effectively implementing a balanced approach to assessments and using results to make informed decisions about curriculum instruction and accountability of the educational process.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are secondary (students ages 14-18) educators' beliefs about what, why, how, and for whom school systems are assessing students' learning?
2. What is the difference between educators' beliefs about assessment and the processes by which they assess students' learning?

### 3. Do educators perceive a balance of assessments of students' learning?

#### **Conceptual Framework**

To conduct a comparative analysis for my dissertation research, I integrated the framework of Stiggins et al. (2011) from the Assessment Training Institute (ATI) with that of the Assessment Reform Group (2002) (ARG) to create my own framework as a means to horizontally examine educators' perceptions and observations of the assessment process to answer my research questions (Creswell, 2007).

Through their work with The Assessment Training Institute (based in Portland, OR), (ATI) Stiggins et al. (2011) have created a few different iterations of this model based on their research that stems from the Assessment for Learning practices in the United Kingdom (Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 2009). *Assessment for learning (AfL)*, rather than *assessment of learning* emphasizes an assessment of students' performance formatively to establish a baseline by measuring students' abilities prior to instruction, and summatively to measure whether students learned as a result of instruction. While teachers may have differing views of how to address the assessment process within the classroom setting, ARG (2002), which is based in London, highlights ten essentials for creating effective assessments for learning. ARG (2002) emphasizes the importance of active student involvement in the formation of assessments and the assessment process itself, effective feedback, recognition of the effects of assessment on students' morale, and an adjustment in teaching to accommodate for the assessment results. The ATI model is similar to the ARG's ideology in that it also stresses the importance of creating effective assessments and the importance of students' involvement.

I have specifically created this model based on the elements of the ATI model currently in use that demonstrate the interactions of the four concepts I am researching: the “what, why, how, and for whom” of the assessment process (as referenced by my first research question). Meanwhile, I also integrated the 10 central tenets of AfL from ARG’s model, and in doing so, I combined both models into one comprehensive model (Figure 1.1).

To translate this diagram, consider Keys 1, 2, 3, and 4 as working harmoniously to provide students with balanced assessments for learning. The elements that create accurate assessment are found within Key 2 and Key 4 provides for an environment that is conducive to effective assessments. Upon further examination, note Key 1 is integral to the diagram, as Stiggins et al. (2011) referred to AfL’s need for a “clear purpose” in creating accountability, as in “for whom are school systems assessing students’ learning?”

In creating an environment conducive for assessments, Key 2 requires effective communication among stakeholders and addresses, “For whom are school systems assessing students’ learning?” as it directly attends to the need for school systems to consider stakeholders and data collection and reporting. Key 4 also emphasizes the need for students’ involvement in the assessment process by understanding the learning targets and assessing their own abilities.

Also note that Keys 3 and 4 directly lead to the development of how school systems assess students’ learning and reflect the ATI model’s reference to “sound design,” which is reflected in the question, “How are school systems assessing students’ learning?” Like the work of Stiggins et al. (2011), my model stresses the importance of

affording students' involvement in the assessment process to create effective assessments  
measure students' abilities more accurately.

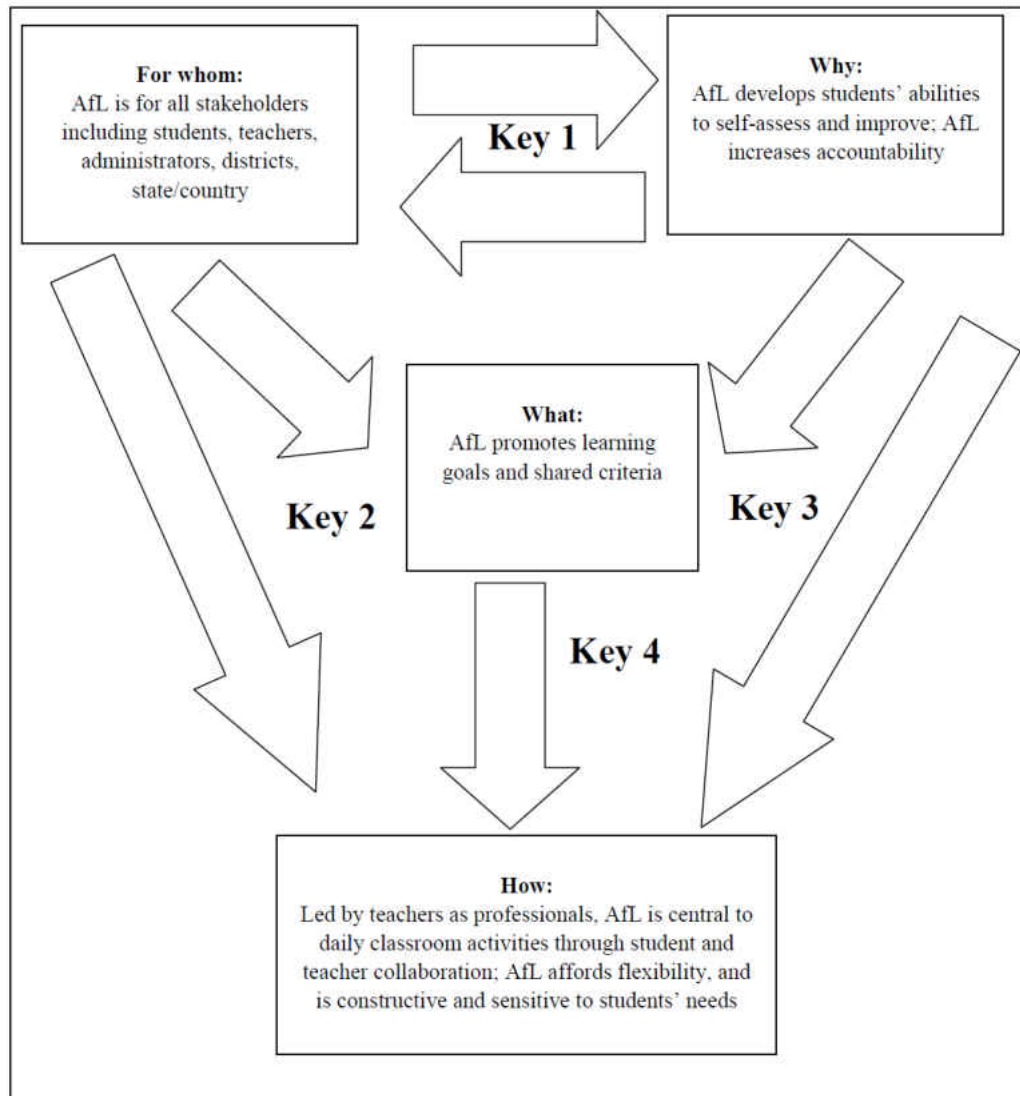


Figure 1.1. A Conceptual Framework for the Assessment Process.

## Definition of Terms

### United States

*American College Testing Exam (ACT)*—a university entrance exam in United States, used by the State of North Dakota as a summative assessment of students in their junior year (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013d)

*Adequate Yearly Progress*—a measurement of students’ progress as based on the calculations defined by the state under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001)

*AdvancED*—a company that provides inspection services to schools for school improvement and accreditation (AdvancED, 2014a)

*Assessment for Learning (AfL)*—teachers guide students understanding outcome-based learning and assist students in generating self-assessments through comparisons between students’ work and the standard expectations, facilitating changes in the learning process when necessary (Stiggins, 2008)

*Assessment Training Institute (ATI)*—launched by Stiggins in 1992, ATI’s mission is to assist classroom teachers in generating student-involved classroom assessments (Pearson Education, 2013).

*Common Core Curriculum (CCC)*—a set of standards established by the Council of Chief State School Officers and adopted by the state of North Dakota (effective July 2013) (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

*Curriculum director*—provides guidance for teachers and other school personnel in articulating the standards into content taught within the classroom setting (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013b).

*Department of Education Organization Act (Public Law 96-88)*—outlines a need for improvement in educational programs at the federal level as school systems must respond to the market needs of increased technologies and a more complex society

*Formative assessment*—an initial (and/or ongoing) assessment that measures students' knowledge to establish a baseline for academic achievement during a course of study; these assessments may or may not contribute to an overall demonstration of a students' grade (Stiggins, 2008)

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*—passed in 2001, this act reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) by supporting a standards-based education that requires all participating states to annually measure students' achievement to receive funding

*Outcome-Based Education (OBE)*—educational professionals identify specific goals, standards, or outcomes to establish a learning model or plan in which they instruct students to achieve the desired outcome (Brandt, 2013)

*Principal*—leads school all personnel, including teachers, ancillary staff, and students in the school environment (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013c).

*Private school*—a United States school system that is funded by a private source (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013a).

*Professional Learning Community (PLC)*—a group of professionals meet regularly to discuss best practices and collaborate for instructional improvement (DuFour, 2004)

*Public school*—a school system that is funded by local, state, and/or federal government (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013a).

*Race to the Top (R2T)*—a government program that allocates funding for states that develop valid assessments that measure students performance on comprehensive standards and use the results to influence decision-making regarding instructional practices (United States Department of Education, 2010b).

*Response to Intervention (RTI)*—a model in which schools address students’ educational needs through a series of interventions (Buffum, 2008)

*Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)*—a university entrance exam in the United States, produced by College Board (2013).

*State assessment*—an annual, interim assessment that is provided by the state (i.e. North Dakota) that is based on a set of collective state standards and/or benchmarks (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013d).

*Summative assessment*—an assessment that measures students’ academic achievement at the end of a course of study (Stiggins, 2008).

*Teacher*—instructs and assesses students on standards within the classroom setting (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013b).

*The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227), 1994*—school districts that opt to participate by creating a school improvement plan receive additional federal funding (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2013d).

## **United Kingdom**

*Academy school*—an English school (may offer specialist subject areas and is supported by government funding, but also has community or corporate sponsors; these schools do not have to follow the English National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013b).



*Advanced Level (A-Level)*—an advanced exam course taken during the last two years of a student’s education in preparation for university acceptance (16-18 year olds) (A level, 2013).

*Advanced Subsidiary Level (AS-Level)* —an intermediate exam course taken during the last two years of a student’s education in preparation for university acceptance (AS level, 2013).

*Assessment for Learning (AfL)*—an assessment conducted by students and teachers that informs instruction in which teachers adapt to students’ needs (Black & Wiliam, 2010).

*Assessment Reform Group (ARG)*—a group of volunteer professionals who uphold the goal of ensuring policy and practice regarding assessments align with current research (Mansell, James, & The Assessment Reform Group, 2009).

*Community school*—an English school in which a local education association owns the educational building and grounds, employs staff, and oversees admissions (Strayer University Online, 2013).

*Curriculum director*—provides guidance for teachers and other personnel within the school system in articulating the standards into content taught within the classroom setting.

*English National Curriculum*—the set of standards established by England’s Department for Education (1988) that guide courses of study (Department for Education, 2013h).

*Formative assessment*—an initial (and/or ongoing) assessment that measures students’ knowledge to establish a baseline for academic achievement during a course of

study; these assessments may or may not contribute to an overall demonstration of a students' grade (Black & Wiliam, 2010)

*Foundation school*—an English school in which a governing body employs staff and oversees admissions (Strayer University Online, 2013).

*Free school*—an English school that is launched through community resources and partnerships.

*General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)*—an academic qualification essentially equivalent to a high school diploma (Department for Education, 2013c).

*Headteacher*—the educational leader of an English school (similar to that of a principal in the United States) (Headteacher, 2013).

*Linear assessment*—an assessment that is given at the end of an academic year of study (i.e., England) (Department for Education, 2013a).

*Module-based assessment*—an assessment that is given at the end of a module course of study (i.e., England).

*Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)*—inspection agency that reviews all aspects of the schools environment and services including students' performance on curricula (Ofsted, 2014).

*Ordinary Level (O-Level)*—an ordinary exam course taken during the last year of a student's education in preparation for general graduation (O level, 2013).

*Public school*—a school system that is funded by a private or charitable source, the term stems from the concept that these schools were not exclusive, but rather were open to the public.

*Sixth form*—the finals year of non-compulsory education for students in England (ages 16-18) (Sixth form, 2013).

*Standards and Testing Agency (STA)*—establishes the educational standards and assessments for English school systems (Department for Education, 2013b).

*State school*—an English school system funded by the government.

*Summative assessment*—an assessment that measures students' academic achievement at the end of a course of study (Taras, 2005).

*Teacher*— instructs and assesses students on standards within the classroom setting (Department for Education, 2013d; Teacher, 2013).

*Teaching agency*—oversees the administration of standardized assessments in English school systems (Department for Education, 2013d).

### **Assumptions**

1. School systems in the United States (North Dakota) and the United Kingdom (Surrey, England) assess students on an established set of curriculum standards in English/Language Arts.
2. Through interviews and observations, the research will reveal the similarities and differences between educators' beliefs about and processes for assessment.

### **Delimitations**

1. The focus of this study is on assessment processes in secondary (students ages 14-18) English/Language Arts classrooms.
2. This is an international comparative study on two schools—one in North Dakota, one in Surrey, England.
3. This study will navigate similarities and differences in cultural and governmental influences in education to guide educators in their approach to the assessment process.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter II contains a literature review that examines trends in assessing students' learning, including an explanation of assessing for learning and the creation of a balanced assessment. Chapter III provides an explanation of my research methods, and Chapter IV contains my findings. Chapter V provides a detailed theoretical analysis of the assessment process in both North Dakota and Surrey, England. Chapter VI discusses my findings in relation to my theoretical analysis and conceptual framework and explains the implications for educational leaders in creating a system that promotes assessment balance.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The current educational climate maintains a focus on the need for educational reform. Under NCLB (2001) and the current iteration of the English National Curriculum (launched in 1988 and revised in 2014), standardized assessments of students' learning became an important tool in establishing accountability of students, teachers, and school systems.

Research shows that these assessments may contain bias (Guskey, 2007) or do not include students in designing assessment process, which may inherently inhibit students' performance (Clarke, 2010; Stiggins, 2008). Also, as a result of the outcome-based education movement, some educational professionals question the adoption market-based curricula, such as that of the Common Core (Ball & Youdell, 2003).

By observing and interviewing educational professionals in one North Dakota school and one Surrey, England school and analyzing them against a framework informed by the research of Assessment Training Institute (Pearson Education, 2013) and the Assessment Reform Group (2002) (ARG), the goal of this study is to provide clarity for educators in both North Dakota and Surrey, England in effectively implementing a balanced approach to assessments and using results to make informed decisions about curriculum instruction and accountability of the educational process.

## **Historical Review of Assessment and Educational Reform**

### **United States**

The United States has undergone educational reform for more than a century, with the first notable emphasis in the United States represented by the Harvard Committee of Ten's influence on high school graduation requirements (by enforcing strict higher education entrance requirements). The educational field is changing rapidly with a greater and greater emphasis on accountability. Political influences, government subsidies and society demands that high school graduates are more readily prepared for the workforce. For example, at the time of this study, North Dakota school systems were transitioning away from the old curricula aligned with the former North Dakota State Standards to new curricula, aligned with the Common Core State Standards. According to State Superintendent Baesler (2013a), "North Dakota educators found that the Common Core was more rigorous and would better prepare our students to continue to compete with other students on a national and international level on multiple measurements" (p. 1). While Baesler (2013a) acknowledged the state has not applied for NCLB waivers or Race to the Top funding, the state is influenced by other states that have led the nation on the new curricula initiative as a means of better preparing students for the workforce and higher education.

As recently as August 2012, former North Dakota University System Chancellor Hamid Shirvani released a plan to create a three-tiered higher educational system that is "mission driven" to focus on student success. Under his proposed plan, students no longer will be accepted into a university based on successfully graduating from a North Dakota high school alone; rather, students must earn a specific ACT composite score, grade point average, and high school percentile rank (NDUS System Office, 2012). Such

a system, one in which students must meet higher performance standards than previously required, inevitably could affect how K-12 school systems educate students. In June 2013, Shirvani was removed from office in light of statewide criticism to his proposals for statewide educational reform; however, more than a year later, the new admissions formula for the statewide higher educational system (Pathways to Student Success) will fully be implemented in 2015, amidst criticism (Kolepack, 2013).

**Standardized Assessments as Measures for Accountability.** When many states provide school districts with nearly 70% of its revenue in foundation aid, policy makers also want an ever-increasing return on their financial investment in the form of human capital (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2012b). On the national level, policy makers' sentiments toward a "return on investment" are similar. In the United States, government policies such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2010), and President Obama's national decree for educational reform (United States Department of Education, 2010b) are designed to provide a greater level of accountability for the country's public school systems. Because each state has the ability to define for itself a set of standards and benchmarks by which to gauge students' mastery of skills, such practices are inclined toward a mainstream system of values by which to empirically measure students' successes. As these legislative practices are increasingly embraced, so too do school systems nationwide begin to reflect on best practices (and educational theories) as a means to understand student achievement. When school systems, however, lack clear criteria or enough data to make informed decisions, they often suffer setbacks when embracing change (Kilgore & Reynolds, 2011). But how do school system administrators know when change is necessary? What criteria and data drive decision making?

**Comprehensive Curricula as a Basis for Assessments.** Nearly all 50 states have embraced the educational reform of the Common Core—a movement launched by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to ensure that all students have the same, essential education, regardless of the state in which they reside. This movement is apparently organized as a state-led effort in which nationwide schools embrace core values of education through a statewide commitment to enactment of standards delineated by the Common Core Initiative by 2015. Forty-five states (including North Dakota) and Washington, D.C. intend to implement assessments of the Common Core standards as they are newly partnering with two assessment consortia: The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. These two consortia received federal funding through the Race to the Top initiative (States Leading See Change, 2012).

In what Fullan (2006) called “tri-level engagement,” the State of North Dakota has embraced a nationwide curriculum movement by adopting the national Common Core State Standards for the English-language arts curriculum. As an “initiative member” of the Common Core Standards Movement, North Dakota’s Department of Public Instruction finalized a draft of new state standards in April 2011. Statewide, school systems officially implemented the standards during the 2013-2014 academic year, and school officials are preparing for the first statewide assessment on the Common Core ,which is set for Spring 2015 (Baesler, 2013a).

**North Dakota Embraced Nationwide Educational Reform.** By adopting the nationwide Common Core standards, North Dakota angled for statewide educational reform—for every school, district, and community—as a means of complying with the



soon-to-expire No Child Left Behind Act and lobbying itself toward President Obama's new incentive for school-wide reform: Race to the Top.

The crux of the debate as to whether the Common Core Standards are an appropriate move toward educational reform in North Dakota (and also by extension elsewhere in the United States), regards the culture of North Dakota's educational system and its ability to embrace change. Comparatively, Heilig, Cole, and Aguilar (2010) conducted a case study in the state of Texas, wherein they not only analyzed current public policy, but also considered trends that spanned the past 15 years. With a focus on a core curriculum that includes reading, writing, and mathematics, they contended that such an emphasis fostered a devaluation of a solid education in the arts. The research of Daugherty, Custer, and Dixon (2012), however, found that structuring curricula and assessments based on a vertically integrated approach is critical for college preparation. For a more positive outlook, perhaps educational leaders need to develop a more comprehensible, conceptual framework for reform that is grounded in an understanding of the emotional and cognitive needs of today's school children (Rose, 2011).

But can North Dakota's educational leaders determine a common goal or purpose for educating North Dakota's children? Obviously the answer lays beyond the basic tenets of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause—everyone has a civil right to an equally rigorous education. But because of the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment, every state must determine for itself the essence of educational rigor, which begs the question as to whether students in North Dakota are receiving an education that is adequate and equal to that of the students who reside in Minnesota or elsewhere.

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (2011a) indicated in a press release summary report that the Common Core State Standards would benefit the state because they are designed to:

- align with college and work expectations;
- be clear, understandable and consistent;
- include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- be informed by other top performing countries; and
- be grounded in research and evidence (p. 1)

The summary report also noted “Few respondents believe the current education system is well prepared to meaningfully implement the Common Core State Standards . . . [however] the Common Core State Standards are seen as an important step in the right direction” (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2011a, p. 4).

While such statewide reform is well intentioned, the final result may not be what educators had in mind, as Fullan (2006) indicated, such reform:

. . . assumes that, by aligning key components and driving them forward with lots of pressure and support, good things will happen, on a large scale. What is missing from the strategy is any notion about *school or district culture*. If theories of action do not include the harder questions – ‘Under what conditions will continuous improvement happen?’ and, correspondingly, ‘How do we change cultures?’—they are bound to fail. (p. 4)

When making the decision to adopt a new curriculum, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (2011a) contended that the Common Core Standards are not driven by the United States Federal Government, and, therefore, are amendable by the state to reflect its local and regional culture. Baesler (2013b) echoed Fullan’s (2006) claim, contending “Standards are not curriculum . . . Curriculum choices of a school are and always will be decided by the local school leaders in communities across North Dakota” (p. 1). The Common Core State Standards Initiative (2012) echoed this claim

and stated, “The federal government is NOT involved in the development of the standards. This has been a state-led and driven initiative from the beginning” (p. 5).

**North Dakota Supports the Common Core Initiative.** The Common Core Standards Initiative (2010) explained this national reformation movement as a state-based effort, with surveys and public buy-in. Some educational leaders, however, believe amendments to the Common Core State Standards may undermine the Common Core Initiative’s intent. According to Sewell (2008), English Language Arts classrooms, particularly those that uphold traditional forms of instruction including rote learning of grammatical principles, provide teachers with authoritative power and control over their classrooms. While grammar instruction may initially appear to be essential in a student’s acquisition and mastery of language, Sewell contended this very concept of best practices that was once upheld in eighteenth century classrooms and now is revisited every 20 to 30 years is “reifying this ideology of authoritarian power and mechanical correctness is the social efficiency movement running parallel to the standardization of the English language curriculum in high schools over the past century” (p. 90).

Furthermore, Sewell (2008) contended that due to the nation’s renewed focus on an essentialist “back to the basics” curriculum, teachers often are required to omit creative exploration of the English language and, rather, implement more efficient methods of instruction that are designed to hold students accountable to concepts that are measured on standardized tests. Sewell also believed far too often curriculum is designed to promote business by pushing more students toward the university system and endorsing the benefits of standardized testing. He stated: “The problem is that while the ELA curriculum represents the needs of organizations like colleges and business, it does

not represent the needs and interests of the students whom the curriculum should serve (p. 91).

Rather than simply reflecting on concepts measured through external exams, students should be afforded the opportunity to voice their opinions through a balanced assessment process (Stiggins, 2008). For example, Graham, Hebert, and Harris (2011) suggested that every state re-examine its high-stakes assessments of the English-language arts curriculum. They contended that such tests must be rewritten with consideration for students with disabilities to account for a greater validity and accuracy. The North Dakota Council of Teachers of English (NDCTE) also holds students' interests as paramount in developing an effective classroom environment and assessment process. NDCTE President Aaron Knodel (2013) noted "Put students first, always," and "Treat your at-risk students the best" (para. 7). As demonstrated by the scores of Common Core aligned lesson plans featured in the NDCTE lesson exchange (on its website), many North Dakota English Language Arts teachers, strive to keep students' needs front and center through the newly adopted curriculum (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

**North Dakota Aligns Curricula to Promote Change.** In order for a school district to implement positive change, it must focus on specific criteria that need to change and specific methods of changing them (Fullan, 2006). However, as Sewell (2008) identified the origins of stasis within the English Language Arts curriculum, he posited three potential methods to provide for a more dynamic curriculum: (a) opportunities for professional development through learning communities, (b) reject outdated and outmoded textbooks, and (c) actively involve students in the learning process. The State of North Dakota attempted to foster communitywide support of the

adoption of the Common Core State Standards; the process neglected to speak to students directly for their input. Rather, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction hired an outside agency, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, to aid a team of educators who analyzed and compared current state standards to the Common Core (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2011b).

It is important to note that a team of highly qualified educators drew up the draft for the North Dakota Common Core Standards and attempted to do so in a non-prescriptive manner and disseminated this document to school districts for an initial review by educators; adoption of the Common Core State Standards at this time does not result in the adoption of a standard textbook and learning materials (not that this would necessarily be a good idea). Such a transition still falls under the jurisdiction of each individual school district (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2011b).

Interestingly enough, however, some schools (such as The Denver Public Schools) have in recent years adopted common textbooks and standardized assessments as a means to improve students' abilities to meet adequate yearly progress per No Child Left Behind. Arguably, the greatest condemnation of the Common Core stems from many educators' concerns over administrations' prescriptive adoption of curricular "modules" presented by the Common Core Initiative as best practices (Lee, 2011). This action has led to a greater degree of dissatisfaction among education professionals, as Au (2011) noted, "Within these logics, all aspects of education therefore must serve the ends of the education process, with student learning purely based on pre-determination, and teachers' content delivery structured by pre-determined 'scientific' methods" (p. 27). As a means to combat prescriptive student instruction, Lee (2011) suggested that educational leaders implement the Common Core Standards on a small-scale basis with small,

professional learning communities that will work from the bottom-up, rather than a state-wide, top-down authoritative adoption of the standards. In this manner, Lee speculated, educators will have the opportunity to personalize the standards, making them relevant for students' needs on an individual basis.

The promotion of the use of professional development and learning communities also falls under individual school district's jurisdiction, but evidently in North Dakota, there is an increase in the adoption of the Response to Intervention model of reform that promotes professional learning communities as a means of developing common best practices among educators and school leaders. Some smaller school districts, including Hillsboro, Larimore and Cavalier, have joined a consortium to broaden their understanding of best practices and vertical integration (AdvancED Evaluation Committee, Personal Communication, April 2012). With an attention to best practices, many teachers were concerned about the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, as the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction indicated:

The majority of respondents are comfortable with the quality of the standards, but they want to be sure that enough is done to ensure successful implementation. They want standards that exist as part of a well-supported, cohesive, seamless education system. (2011b, p. 3)

Other critics of the adoption of Common Core State Standards suggested that the State of North Dakota will lose some semblance of its identity as these standards only pertain to the study of reading and writing and yet they also are to account for social studies, as one North Dakota teacher responded to the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction's (2011a) survey by stating:

I am concerned that science and history-social studies exist only as part of English Language Arts. Giving these disciplines cursory attention and incorporating their content into the ELA standards solely to support ELA learning is a grievous error in terms of preparing students for college/careers. (p. 3)

To reiterate, proponents of the Common Core State Standards maintain that each state has the ability to alter the standards to best serve its constituents, but as these concerns show, not all constituents can agree on curricular essentials. Baesler (2013a) noted:

We do not have a state mandated textbook for any subject nor do we dictate resources for classroom instruction. It is entirely up to local school districts to choose materials that will help our students know and be able to do what is expected of them after each year of school. While some states may purchase statewide textbooks and adopt statewide teaching materials, North Dakota does not. This is not a requirement of the Common Core State Standards and we do not participate in this practice. (p. 1)

On behalf of NDCTE, Church (2012) conducted a survey among all participants of the 2012 state conference in which he asked, “What kind of literature do you teach?” (p. 5). Of the 45 respondents, 89% answered American Literature and 56% answered British Literature. When asked to provide a list of specific authors, respondents overwhelmingly provided lists that included commonly observed members of the American English canon, including Twain, Steinbeck, Emerson, and Thoreau as well as the British English canon, represented by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Dickens (Church, 2012).

## **England**

**Educational reform in Surrey, England.** Many of the educational reforms in the United States have been influenced by educational reforms overseas. Since 1964, under Prime Minister Wilson with the advent of Circular 10/65, school systems within the United Kingdom were on the forefront of political debates over curriculum and instruction. Similar to the United States’ political football, the United Kingdom experienced an ever-swinging pendulum. Regarding the instructional process, Waldman

(2009) noted, there were “fears of teachers and political indoctrination of pupils” during the 1980s as “decentralization left the government very little influence over the curriculum” (p. 204). Since the Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations (SCCE) was established in 1964, teachers who served on influential, local committees established themselves as a driving force in curriculum adoption and examinations; however, this practice changed when then Secretary of State Keith Joseph dissolved the SCCE (Waldman, 2009).

In his 1976 speech at Ruskin College, Oxford former Labor Prime Minister James Callaghan encouraged a “Great Debate” among educational professionals in which they were to consider the foundations and intents of the educational system. One of the central purposes of this debate was to establish a common core curriculum that would provide similar standards of student expectations and greater accountability (as cited in Hughes, 1997). That same year, the British government released the Education Act that amended the comprehensive principle set forth under the Butler Education Act of 1944 and ultimately ended the tripartite educational system (Education England, n.d.a) (educational reforms in both the United States and the United Kingdom continue to recreate multi-tiered educational systems in the forms of voucher systems, and magnet or charter schools).

In 1981, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the secretaries of state created “The School Curriculum” that outlined a national curriculum for all subjects. Under this system, students must take a series of assessments (GCSEs) to demonstrate proficiency and earn credit for their coursework. For example, secondary students take these exams at the end of Key Stage 4 (about age 16). Beginning in 1986, then Secretary of State Kenneth Baker launched a campaign to create a broad-based standard curriculum that



included English language, mathematics, social studies, science, and technology. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had other plans as she believed the subject matter to be too broad and wanted Baker to minimize the prescriptive restrictions, focusing on literacy and mathematical skills. However, Thatcher lost the debate (Hughes, 1997).

In 1988, the English government passed the Educational Reform Act, which paved the way for the English National Curriculum (Swift, 2009). This system was reified when these policies became law in 1991. Statutory “orders” delineated “programmes of study” and “attainment targets,” of which there were 10 different levels of achievement for students ages 5 through 16 (Hughes, 1997). In 1988, the new terminology defined these levels as “key stages” (Table 2.1). This legislation ensured the government tracked students’ performance through a series of tests including the GCSEs and SATs and published a report on all school districts, referred to as “league tables.” These tables, released to the general public, serve as a form of accountability in ensuring students’ readiness for the workforce and high education (Waldman, 2009).

Table 2.1. Key Stages of Students’ Levels of Academic Achievement.

Stage	Age
Key Stage 1	5- to 7-years-old
Key Stage 2	7- to 11-years-old
Key Stage 3	11- to 14-years-old
Key Stage 4	14- to 16-years-old

Though the reform was embraced by some school systems, it also was met with opposition by teachers, students, and other stakeholders who had little influence over curricula decisions. Between 1988 and 1991, there were several groups that revised the English National Curriculum; however these revisions were fraught with political influences (Hughes, 1997).

Following in Conservative Thatcher's lead, Prime Minister Major's government continued educational reform with the adoption of the 1996 Educational Act. This Act delineated the role of the local educational authorities and established definitions of primary and secondary education (Education England, n.d.c).

When Labour Party Prime Minister Tony Blair took the lead, he asserted the he also was dedicated to educational reform. However, his vision of reform took a different course. His government swiftly passed the Education Act of 1997 that established a Curriculum Authority and delineated its qualifications and functions (Education England, n.d.b). That same year, to improve equity and provide greater efficacy of the National Curriculum, Blair launched the Education Action Zones policy, in which specific communities were targeted for continued students' underachievement. These EAZs were allowed to reorganize and redesign content standards of the English National Curriculum under the pretext of innovation; however, the results of these efforts showed few improvements on students' performances on high-stakes tests (Halpin, Dickson, Power, Whitty, & Gewirtz, 2004).

Responding to the new legislation, the Assessment Reform Group, founded in 1989 as "The Policy Task Group on Assessment," was funded by the British Educational Research Association. The group stressed the importance of using assessments to guide and shape classroom environments, rather than simply measuring students' abilities for accountability. Contributing to the debate for reform, the group aligned with the Teaching and Learning Research Programme to promote public understanding for current research on best educational practices (Mansell et al., 2009)

**Curricula under review.** Akin to the educational reform in the United States, the English National Curriculum is currently undergoing review by England's Department

for Education. With Vasagar's 2011 report in *The Guardian* that more than 200 English schools failed to meet nationwide targets, England is preparing for another phase educational reform. Under the current system, the National Curriculum delineates the concepts every English student must achieve to pass the SAT (for primary students) and GCSE (for secondary students) assessments, demonstrating their knowledge and skills in preparation for the workforce or higher education. These scores are publically distributed through "league tables" and stakeholders often form opinions on a school's merit based on them. This may be comparable to the North Dakota State-mandated exams including the North Dakota State Assessment (though it does not have any bearing on whether they will graduate), and the ACT, in which individual schools' results are distributed to the public.

Adoption of the English National Curriculum has posed many challenges for educational leaders. Though Labour Party's Brown succeeded Blair in becoming Prime Minister, his short-lived leadership brought forward the Education and Skills Act of 2008 that affected educational reform. Perceiving a need for more guidance in best practices, the British government invested £150 million in 2008 (distributed over three years) to provide professional development for teachers in Assessment for Learning (Knight, 2008). Though this process may have provided some guidance in addressing curriculum and assessment concerns, some school systems still struggled to perform as measured by standardized assessments. According to the Academies Act 2010, some school districts were forced into "academy status" as a result of poor performance on the national GCSE (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2010).

Due to challenges faced by the Labour Party prime ministers and the return to Conservative Party rule under Cameron, the English National Curriculum is undergoing a

revision that may change the way education is taught and assessed in English public schools (Shimmon, 2010). In November 2010, the University of Cambridge released a report in which the Secretary of State Michael Gove stated:

. . . my Department will launch its own review of the National Curriculum and the remit will, explicitly for the first time, require benchmarking against the most successful school systems . . . this has to be done with great care to avoid learning the wrong lessons from countries with very different cultures. (Oates, 2010)

Gove reflected on the importance of acknowledging a country's culture when establishing grounds for comparison, and in so doing, Oates (2010) indicated the Department for Education was considering the educational systems of countries such as Canada, Finland, and Singapore for their recent PISA ratings. In her comparison between the United Kingdom's and the United States' adoption of curriculum standards, Steketee (2004) explained, "Outcome-based goals together with assembly line standardization seem to be a natural fit with private and market influences" (p. 180). She noted management-based educational reform through firms such as Edison (launched in the United States in 1992) have increasingly influenced educational reform in the United Kingdom, as Edison launched its UK counterpart in 2002.

Education Secretary Michael Gove loosened the restrictions on English academy school systems in 2010, allowing them to reinterpret the English National Curriculum if teachers and administrators perceived it in the best interest of students' needs (Shimmon, 2010). Meanwhile, Gove proposed a revision to these standards so they more appropriately reflected "requisite skills" for the workforce, and in June 2012, he revised the new National Curriculum timetable, implementing new standards in math, science, English and other subjects in 2014 (Department for Education, 2013e). That same month, Gove also decreed that all state school systems would move away from the GCSE

assessments that have been in place since the early '90s in favor of a more traditional standardized test: the O-level (Harrison, 2012).

To complicate this plan, England's Department for Education has decreed all state school systems would also transition from a module based, or formative system of assessments to a linear, summative plan (Department for Education, 2012). Essentially, Gove's proposed curriculum and assessment changes may require schools across the country to rethink the way they teach and assess students.

**Educational reform as privatization.** While some school systems have experienced some success by relaxing the English National Curriculum expectations to meet the needs of students, Ball and Youdell (2003) noted the trend for educational reform is a thinly veiled goal for privatization of education on a global scale:

The UK and USA in particular have been "social laboratories" of education reform, experimenting with innovations in public sector provision which have involved various different forms of privatisation. Not all of these experiments have taken root but both countries have become the focus of attention of policy makers from multilateral organisations and other countries looking for policy solutions to entrenched educational problems. This has given rise to "policy-borrowing" and policy transfers and "export" and some degree of policy convergence. (p.75)

Ball and Youdell (2003) scrutinized such educational systems, explaining that these school systems often form "partnerships" with businesses to establish curricula and re-envision school systems from a market-based perspective. Critics of the National Curriculum from across the political spectrum may retain the resounding answer to these challenges: there has to be another way to ensure uphold students' learning while maintaining accountability.

## **Assessment-Directed Curriculum**

Whether we are considering the North Dakota or Surrey, governments often place much effort in establishing educational consistency and concrete instructional guidelines for its school systems. While educational leaders in England struggled to ensure students are prepared for the university or the workforce as defined by the English National Curriculum upon completion of their compulsory education, educational reformists in the United States also envisioned a need for students to be more globally competitive.

Considering the history of educational reform in both the United States and the United Kingdom, one method of determining a school's "relevancy" and "rigor" is through systematic standardized testing through either statewide assessments (NDSA) and ACT (in the United States) or the SAT and GCSE (in the United Kingdom).

According to the Obama Administration's "The Blueprint for Reform":

To foster public accountability for results and help focus improvement and support efforts, states must have data systems in place to gather information that is critical to determining how schools and districts are progressing in preparing students to graduate from high school college- and career-ready. (United States Department of Education, 2010a, p. 8).

With a greater attention to public accountability, more school districts and K-12 teachers are pressed to comply with NCLB or other sanctions to ensure a steady flow of government funding. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Cameron's government is considering scrapping the current GCSE exams altogether (Batty & Watt, 2013). With an increasing gap in student achievement between affluent students and those who receive reduced-price lunches, many of those in Parliament, however, fear a return to a two-tiered system (Watt, 2014).

## **Assessments and Accountability**

In the name of educational reform, school systems have placed emphasis on standardized, summative assessments as a means to gauge students' improvement (Stiggins, 2008). Though educators continue to check for understanding through formative assessments, school districts in North Dakota, for example, have increased their use of standardized assessments such as Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress to improve students' performance on summative state assessments that are a requirement under NCLB.

Reformists often embraced educational theories that emphasized accountability through standardized testing systems, such as those found in England. Test companies, such as Renaissance Learning, (which was founded in 1986 in the United Kingdom) cropped up across the United States, offering new tools to aid classroom instruction (Renaissance Learning, 2012). As school districts more commonly use summative assessments for accountability purposes, critics of the system stress the importance of creating an educational culture that affords students the opportunity to understand the assessment process and receive scores to help them improve their achievement (Clarke, 2010). However, overly emphasizing the need for standardized assessments also may create an imbalance of assessments, and can potentially alter the decisions educators make within their classrooms (Stiggins, 2008). Critics of educational reform through the use of assessments, cite a greater need for validity and reliability on the part of companies, such as ETS, that generate tests based on state curricula. Whether formative or summative, assessment validity is paramount when using assessments for accountability. Some critics cite a greater need for improved assessments for students with disabilities, per requirements under NCLB. They make recommendations for

addressing vertical alignment that is in compliance with Title I that maintains a similar depth and scope in assessing students on content standards that would be more comparable to that of their classmates without disabilities (Flowers, Browder, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006).

### **Assessment Validity and Differentiation**

Understanding the assessment process is integral for students' success. Several critics noted some assessments suffer as a result of an inherent bias, or lack proper methods for differentiation, making validity difficult when assessing students with special needs (Bowen, 2006). To improve students' performance on summative assessments, Cho and Kingston (2011) recommended school systems within the United States implement curriculum-based measurements to track students' performances in compliance with NCLB. However, they acknowledged that states should restructure participation guidelines for examinations to prevent students being inappropriately assigned to tests or testing accommodations.

As teachers are ever-increasingly expected to meet the needs of all students under NCLB, there has come a greater need for testing validity in creating tests that are designed to assist teachers in understanding individual students' abilities more effectively. Differentiation within classroom instruction has become increasingly important. As a means to foster differentiation, many school districts in the United States have purchased the rights to implement formative standardized tests such as the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP) test and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test. However, many school districts that cannot justify additional funding for such tests may generate their own "common assessments" or may simply use their summative state-mandated tests,



which often are prepared by a national test-generating facility, such as the Educational Testing Services. As “The Blueprint for Reform” indicates, in the near future, more funding will be allocated for schools to improve their assessment systems:

States will receive formula grants to develop and implement high-quality assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards in English language arts and mathematics that accurately measure student academic achievement and growth, provide feedback to support and improve teaching, and measure school success and progress. States may also use funds to develop or implement high-quality, rigorous statewide assessments in other academic or career and technical subjects, high school course assessments, English language proficiency assessments, and interim or formative assessments. (United States Department of Education, 2010, pp. 11-12)

Keeping in line with the increased attention to statewide standards and assessments under the State Superintendent Baesler, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction chose to adopt the exam offered by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which it intends to implement in Spring 2015 (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2013).

School systems in England, by comparison, also uphold the practice of assessing students’ learning for accountability purposes and purchase assessments from testing companies that are approved and supported by the Department for Education. The Assessment Reform Group, The Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment, and the General Teaching Council for Assessment all support a new vision for assessing students learning: assessment by teachers. However, such a model is not currently supported by the Department for Education, as it stresses a need for “high-quality, rigorous” assessments (Gardner, 2008). As the Assessment Reform Group supports the findings of Black and Wiliam (1998), they encouraged stakeholders to ask: By what gauge are school systems measuring these assessments? Who decides whether an assessment is rigorous?

Other assessment concerns involved the use of technology in the assessment process, and the tendency to “teach to the test” (Fletcher, 2012). Regarding assessment formatting, the formatting itself can pose challenges to establishing assessment validity. The use of technology in the assessment process may pose challenges in creating tests that will generate truly useful diagnostic tools (Simulation Spreads, 2012). Kingston and Nash (2011) found United States educators who used computer-based systems had students who generally performed better on formative assessments, other studies have shown that there is little difference between a traditional pencil and paper or computer-based testing apparatus (Shudong, 2008).

Examining assessments for validity by comparing performances of students with and without visual impairments, Zebehazy, Zigmond, and Zimmerman (2012) found that there were several tests United States state-based assessments that needed additional accommodations for students with visual impairments to adequately gauge students’ abilities. In England, Crisp, Johnson, and Novakovic (2012) also had similar findings in analyzing the assessment process for students with dyslexia, noting that simple changes to the format of the test would produce more accurate results.

Clarke (2010) examined difficulties in providing adequate assessments for students with limited language usage and found that because many school districts implement accommodations for students with learning disabilities, students’ performance on the assessments may not be accurate as many of these students do not have learning disabilities, but rather simply lack the language skills required to take the assessments. Kenyon, MacGregor, Li, and Cook (2011) stressed the need for vertical scaling on the ELL proficiency test under No Child Left Behind. Under NCLB, all students are measured in four areas: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. These researchers

found the longitudinal implications of implementing a vertical scaling system in documenting and promoting student growth. To improve opportunities for all students to learn, especially students with disabilities, Lohmeier (2009) recommended a step-by-step process in aligning content standards to that of an expanded core curriculum.

England's Department for Education's (2011a) study illustrated teachers may also perceive the role of assessments differently than those who are designing them. Similarly in the United States, Towles-Reaves and Kleinert (2006) conducted a study that examined the use of alternative assessments and their use in establishing an individualized learning plan (IEP) for American students. They found that teachers perceive the role of assessments as more influential on daily learning activities than on the development of an IEP.

### **Formative Assessments as a Measurement of Student Competency**

Though the concept of formative assessments is not new, with an increased attention to assessment on both continents, the concept has become a buzzword; regardless, many teachers believe that whether assessments are standardized, or naturalistically (intuitively) developed, formative assessments are essential for effective instruction.

When using these standardized tests formatively, instructors will measure students' abilities upon entering a course of study. After reviewing the test results, teachers are then encouraged to adjust the depth and breadth of knowledge covered by classroom instruction to meet the needs of each student; thereby, implementing a clear target for each core standard in which specific students struggle. Stiggins (2008) suggested educators reconsider their feedback strategies and build toward internal

motivations as students begin to succeed, noting that the assessment “must fit the context by providing that specific information in a timely and understandable manner” (p. 2).

Meanwhile, England’s Association for Achievement and Improvement Through Assessment (AAIA) (2006) contended, “Teachers should employ a range of assessment strategies on a day-to-day basis and base their judgements [sic] on a wide range of evidence in order to obtain a holistic view of pupils’ achievements” (p. 2). Ongoing, systematic, formative assessments can be teacher-generated and teacher-led, AAIA (2006) explained. With the influence of Black and Wiliam’s (1998) seminal text “Inside the Black Box,” AAIA supports professional development for teachers who strive to create assessments for learning that include “questioning, feedback, and peer/self assessment” (GL Assessment, 2014).

### **Summative Assessments as a Measurement of Teacher Competency**

Many school districts use summative standardized tests as a means to gauge whether students have achieved a specific level of comprehension or have received an overall desired level of rigorous instruction. Often, many teachers in the United States doubt these summative evaluations, noting the assessments aren’t designed to accurately measure students’ abilities, but rather are intended to measure a teacher’s competency. Increasingly, this notion is solidified in the use of test scores to establish grounds for “performance pay” and promotions. A poll sponsored by the Public Agenda and Learning Point Associates supports this notion, indicating that 72% of Generation X educators (those born between 1960 and 1979) said that tying a teacher’s pay to students’ results determined by standardized tests is biased (Listening to American Teachers, 2010, p. 6). “The Blueprint for Reform” echoes this movement, acknowledging:

Improved assessments can be used to accurately measure student growth; to better measure how states, districts, schools, principals, and teachers are educating students; to help teachers adjust and focus their teaching; and to provide better information to students and their families. (United States Department of Education, 2010a, p. 11)

Though many American teachers are fearful of using these assessments as a tool to gauge teacher effectiveness, some British teachers not only welcome the practice, but also uphold it as their students' scores on standardized assessments are visible by the public through the use of "league tables." Since 2006, these ratings serve as evidence of a teacher's success within the classroom, warranting an increase in pay ("Upper Pay Scale"), alongside teacher-generated portfolios that document targeted goals (Mansell et al., 2009). Research shows, however, that the implementation of the "Upper Pay Scale" has not demonstrated an increase in teacher performance, but rather may actually promote "teaching to the test" (Mansell et al., 2009). Hargreaves (2002) supported this notion, stating:

As for teachers, every year an increasing number of heads and teachers, who have previously been upright members of their profession feel the need to cheat in the key stage tests. It is tragic that they then have to pay the terrible penalty of shamed resignation when their malpractice is discovered. (p. 8)

Though such educational professionals' indiscretions have been documented on both sides of the Atlantic, conversely, many teachers—both in the United States and the United Kingdom—support the implementation of standardized tests as a means to improve student achievement. However, some educational professionals find the government-supported abuse of school districts by profiteering test-bank businesses as unethical (Rapoport, 2011). Testing companies often contend that a national test (whether in the United States, the United Kingdom, or elsewhere) could be "for everyone" so that students could not only compare themselves to the national average,

but could also compare their scores against the scores of their parents, teachers, and friends (Smith, 2010).

Reflecting on the United States' action of embracing educational reform first introduced in the United Kingdom (Taras, 2009), by considering educators and educational constituents' opposition to such sanctions, one may question whether assessment-directed curriculum—one in which assessments set targets for instruction—is in the best interest of students.

### **Support of Assessment-directed Curricula**

While the debate regarding the necessity for standardized assessments ensues for some school systems, many educators have voiced their support. According to a poll conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Scholastic Inc., 92% of teachers believe frequent in-class assessments are essential in measuring students' abilities (Listening to American Teachers, 2010, p. 6). These assessments, however, may not be high-stakes, standardized exams, but rather, they may be formative and teacher-generated. For some schools that use assessments for accountability purposes, they may not perceive the teacher-generated assessments to be as accurate as those provided by an assessment company. To remedy this perceived problem, some educational researchers such as DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) stressed the importance of professional development in creating authentic assessments that accurately measure targeted outcomes. DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho explained, “. . . teachers need to be equipped with a thorough and easily implemented approach for developing appropriate assignments. By definition, Authentic Assessment appears to be best suited for meeting the educational needs of students with diverse learning styles” (p. 58). Instead of implementing “traditional reactive methods” to education (where educators formally

assess students and struggle to re-teach when they discover the students have not met their targets), many educators in the United States and the United Kingdom have taken a more proactive approach through assessment-directed curriculum and have witnessed students' success as a direct result. According to Kalberg, Lane, and Menzies (2010):

. . . schools have developed systematic, data driven models that include (a) primary, school-wide supports to prevent harm from occurring, (b) secondary supports such as small group instruction in specific reading or social skills to reverse harm; and (c) tertiary supports such as functional assessment-based interventions to reduce harm. . . . school-wide data are used to identify students who might benefit from secondary and tertiary prevention efforts. (p. 562)  
Much like the tiered system of Buffum's (2008) model described in his book, *The*

*Pyramid Response to Intervention*, many educators embrace new tactics in measuring students for success. Such models initially were developed to determine students' comprehension of standards-based concepts; however, teachers are increasingly using such models as a means to evaluate at-risk students. In this regard, these assessments are then designed to delineate students' degrees of ability (or inability) to ensure they are achieving targeted goals and adequate yearly progress as a part of NCLB.

### **Models for Educational Reform Embrace Formative and Summative Assessments**

Meanwhile in Surrey, England, educators also developed reform models that incorporate assessments as a tool to guide and support students toward academic success. For example, England's Department for Education has constructed a "Five-stage Cycle for School Improvement" program that assists educators in interpreting data obtained from the state's Standard Attainment Tasks and Tests assessment that students to better plan for students' attainment of the desired learning targets (Gregory & Clarke, 2003).

Fluckiger, Vigil, Pasco, and Danielson (2010) highlighted the benefits of formative feedback for students and educators in secondary school systems, noting, "These techniques give feedback in time for revisions to occur, provide scaffolding for

learners, inform instruction, and most importantly, involve students as partners in assessment” (p. 140). While the feedback need not necessarily be in the form of a standardized assessment, Fluckiger et al. acknowledged the inherent benefits of open communication between instructors and students in the learning process, in which students are afforded the opportunity to voice their opinions on the methods and ideas that drive instruction.

The benefits of formative assessments and feedback in directing curricula are not limited to the work in both the United States and the United Kingdom, nor are they limited to the secondary level. Rather, these benefits are demonstrated on a global scale, spanning from PK through higher education. For example, Buldu (2010) believed that “teachers need to ensure they meet the needs of each child in their classrooms and that the information they use for decision making is unbiased and culturally sensitive” (p. 1439). Through his research, Buldu found that pedagogical documentation as a form of formative assessment is essential in upholding teachers’ consistency and adherence to national standards.

While Buldu (2010) acknowledged that the feasibility of “pedagogical documentation” (educators’ note-taking on classroom practices) for other kindergarten programs had yet to be determined, he found that the practice provided a great benefit to children in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) educational system that like the United States’ emphasis on national educational reform, stresses an adherence to a national standards-based curriculum. He ventured to say that “the results of this study show that pedagogical documentation as a formative assessment technique can be considered a viable alternative to traditional standardized assessment techniques used in yearly childhood programs” (p. 1449). While Buldu’s study focused on early-childhood



programs in UAE, such documentation could also benefit the elementary and secondary settings elsewhere as more and more school systems are moving toward differentiation and preparing” the “whole child” for college or career readiness.

Both Fluckiger et al. (2010) and Buldu (2010) highlighted the importance of formative assessments in informing educators to reform curricula, and both stressed that such assessments need not be standardized-test based. While their research is in support of national core curriculum standards, the research of Feldman (2010) suggested that educators use formative assessments to empower themselves in establishing their own assessment criteria and curriculum. In practice, Feldman believed the process may, in fact, “galvanize internal improvement systems” (p. 240).

### **Opposition to Assessment-directed Curricula**

Though much evidence indicates that assessment-directed curricula is beneficial for students, there exists a great deal of oppositional evidence. While the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Scholastic Inc. found that a majority of teachers support classroom assessments, only 27% of teachers agreed that state-mandated standardized tests were essential (Listening to American Teachers, 2010, p. 6). Although one may initially consider this poll to be in support of assessment-directed curricula, one may question whether these frequent in-class assessments of which these educators support are standardized (generated by a test bank company, such as that of NWEA’s MAP test) or whether these tests are common assessments created by the teachers themselves.

Perhaps many teachers in the United States would agree that teacher-generated assessments are a natural and intuitive approach to learning. However, as the United Kingdom is culturally different, teachers there may not support this belief. British researchers Black and Wiliam (2010) supported this notion, indicating that standardized

assessment-directed curriculum often fosters rote methodology and superficial learning environments. They upheld that such environments create situations in which educators often feel compelled to teach to the test, rather than nurture genuine inquiry.

Furthermore, such tests, they argued, overly emphasize students' achievements as measured by the concept of individual proficiency, rather than relevant advice, active engagement, and implementation of concepts.

Dorn (2010) acknowledged that formative assessments are a useful tool in guiding curriculum when implemented properly. He believed "organizational, political, and cultural frictions" (frictions caused by differences in values or politics) have dramatically altered the formative assessment's development and may, in fact, conflict with the overall mission and vision of a school system and potentially affect the way Americans envision education for decades to come. He contended that assessment-directed curriculum reform could potentially affect the organizational frameworks within school systems nationwide. While one may posit such a shakeup could serve as a beneficial impetus for change, Dorn suggested that the political crossfire could create additional barriers to student achievement, unless teachers are able to potentially embrace a hybridization of formative assessment-driven curriculum (i.e. a balanced assessment in which students' assessment is ongoing) wherein teachers must re-envision how to implement educational concepts.

In the United Kingdom, the "frictions" Dorn references may be more overt because "league tables" publically rank school systems, the potential for political outcry is apparent, as Gregory and Clarke (2003) noted:

Publishing raw school-level results places schools in a marketplace environment, with each trying to attract more able students. . . . There is some evidence that schools attempt to control their student intake, selecting more able students ahead

of those with learning difficulties in order to raise or maintain test scores. (pp. 67-68)

On both continents, school systems have embraced both formative and summative assessments in measuring students' ability to achieve learning targets, ensuring students uphold the status quo. However, as educators embrace such reforms, their concerns about their ability to teach may increase as well. According to Goren (2010), many educators in the United States contend they are ill-equipped to fully implement the results of the standardized tests, and thereby, inform their curriculum due to a lack of time and educational resources to fully understand the results and their potential impact. Goren explained further, noting "Educators and policymakers need to understand more about the testing products they are buying, what purpose they have for such tests, and what purposes the suppliers have in marketing and selling their products" (p. 128).

Goren's (2010) concern is for United States' school systems that blindly adopt curricula and testing services without care or concern for the suppliers' political motivations or affiliations, or an awareness of the extent to which such suppliers are relying on national educational reform policies to fill their pocketbooks. England's school systems, by comparison, must adopt assessments generated by companies that have earned approval by the Department for Education (such as AQA). On its face, this process may eliminate some concern over the political nature of the assessments. Assessment and professional development providers such as AQA provide resources for educators that facilitate instruction and assessments, with claims that include "We are an education charity. Our aim is to bring out the best in students and teachers by providing services that lead to inspiring lessons and great learning" (AQA, 2013). Though these companies demonstrate a concern for students' abilities to learn, Goren's argument may

call into question their altruism, whether these assessment companies are businesses whose sole function is to make money.

### **Achieving Objectivity for Accountability and Validity**

Although supporters of assessment-directed curriculum note that such assessments need not be in the form of standardized tests, as school systems increasingly feel pressured to provide accountability, many opt to buy such test-bank services to provide the semblance of objectivity. In her examination of assessment-directed curriculum, Taras (2009) illustrated that while a focus on assessment has provided students with an opportunity to understand their education implicitly (through summative assessments that may uphold targets outside of the classroom structure), she encouraged that researchers continue to examine the assessment process, acknowledging, “Missing from some examples of [formative assessment] research and processes suggested to teachers are explicit points where [formative assessment] is used by the learners and then re-examined by the teacher” (p. 10). Taras and other researchers posited educators’ due diligence in reevaluating instruction is paramount in formative and summative assessments’ validity, as the research of Kurz, Elliot, Wehby, and Smithson (2010) also suggested:

Alignment between the intended, planned, and enacted curricula for general and special education teachers . . . was relatively low . . . [which] raises the question of adequate opportunity to learn for general and special education students and thus warrants replication with a larger and more diverse sample size. (p. 143)

Kurz et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of teachers’ adherence to a standards-based, vertically integrated curriculum as a means to ensure students’ success. Their research found that far too many teachers drilled students on personal-interest-based curriculum, rather than curriculum that complied with a widely accepted state or

national standard. Such findings can result in a greater attention to the adoption of core standards and teachers' educational development in curriculum instruction as a part of education reform, as Darling-Hammond's article "They're Number One" (2010) illustrated Finland's successful educational reform, which has brought the country continued improvement in student proficiency. While Finland's educators rely on professional learning communities and collaboration to understand best practices, they do not rely on prescriptive testing. Darling-Hammond clarified that Finland does not use external standardized assessments for ranking students.

In his letter to the American people, "The Blueprint for Reform," President Barack Obama wrote:

A world-class education is also a moral imperative – the key to securing a more equal, fair, and just society. We will not remain true to our highest ideals unless we do a far better job of educating each one of our sons and daughters. We will not be able to keep the American promise of equal opportunity if we fail to provide a world-class education to every child. (United States Department of Education, 2010a, p. 5)

Researchers from both sides of the debate in the United States may agree with Obama's statement, as the need for educational reform is not only an economic imperative, but also is a concern of human rights.

In as much as research supports the United States Department of Education's guidelines for educational reform through assessment-directed curricula, research also supports the detriment to authentic learning environments—including a lack of critical thinking—when such assessments are designed to measure rote-concept recall.

Hargreaves (2002) stressed:

The traditional paper-based question or problem is for many students more frightening than stimulating; and to hazard an answer or solution through writing alone is by no means always the most creative or imaginative or even just appropriate way of displaying one's knowledge, skill or understanding. (p. 2)

Though research has yet to fully determine whether standardized tests, produced by national test-generating facilities, are an appropriate measurement of students' proficiency are culturally impartial, research has shown that a greater awareness of students as individuals leads to the greater likelihood for academic success (Buffum, 2008).

### **Global Comparisons of Student Achievement**

The assessment process has undergone a transformation both in the United Kingdom and the United States as educational systems strive for greater globalization of curricula and cope with imbalance. Karseth and Sivesind (2010) questioned the implications of a globalized curriculum in an age of accountability and traced the history of compulsory education in England and the shift from content-oriented to learning-oriented outcomes in measuring students' performance. Though educators are beginning to reframe their thinking regarding educational reform, students' performances on national tests in the United States are still compared to students' performances in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Education Week released an article comparing states' performances on the NAEP tests. North Dakota earned a C- grade with a mere 34.1 percent of all eighth grade students earning a proficiency in reading (K-12 Achievement, 2012). Also, school systems in both the United States and the United Kingdom use summative standardized assessments such as PISA for comparative purposes, despite differences in educational opportunities, educational funding, and the overall gross domestic product per capita (OECD, 2011). Students' scores on the PISA in the United States and England were comparable, with mean scores of 500 and 494 respectively (OECD, 2011). England's Department for Education (2011a) conducted a study in which

participants were asked to compare the English National Curriculum to the curricular structures in other countries. Eleven percent of the respondents noted that “the context in which the children learnt was different in other countries, so it was impossible to adopt their educational systems entirely” (p. 51). Furthermore, the respondents were concerned about the drill and practice required to prepare students for the PISA, noting, “. . . the PISA should not be the only measure of the United Kingdom’s educational performance” because improved scores do not reflect “well-rounded employees suited to the modern workplace” (p. 51).

### **Students’ Perceptions**

But what is in the best interests of students? Parkison (2009) examined how United States teachers interpreted academic standards as a means to establish accountability measures, contending that to contextualize content effectively within a classroom setting teachers must be willing to openly discuss the impact of standards and anticipated outcomes to move beyond the “fetish” with standardized tests. Kingston and Nash (2011) found there may be more value in implementing formative assessments in English/language arts classrooms than in math or science classrooms, acknowledging the necessary research was limited due to poorly implemented assessment practices. Acknowledging that many elements of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) (in the United States) are limited in scope, Sacks and Rothstein (2010) believed that it is the duty of educators and researchers to promote the ECC by developing curricula and assessments, professional development, and establishing partnerships with teacher training programs to ensure all students have an equal opportunity for academic achievement.

Proponents of educational reform of the English National Curriculum cited students' performance as indicative of a perceived need for such reform. Lambert (2011) cited geography courses as one area in great need for reform:

Successive Ofsted subject reports on geography, including the two most recent (Ofsted, 2008, 2011), provide powerful evidence to support the contention that in schools and classrooms where there is a question mark about the quality of teaching, or the level of achievement, it results from a lack of intellectual engagement in some way. (p. 244)

Lambert (2011) acknowledged the curriculum itself may not be the challenge, but rather the poor quality of teachers' pedagogical practices (with a keen attention to students' needs and course content)—which are hard to codify—are often to blame when students do not learn. Furthermore, demographic and enrollment changes in school systems can result in a perceived need for educational reform, as Davies, Adnett, and Turnbull (2003) found: “They have sought to reduce the impact on their curricula through heavy subsidization of academic courses, but in some schools this process is beginning to look unsustainable” (p. 494). By addressing these changes, school systems were able to implement improvements, including, “the increase in the specialist schools programme and, for some schools, relaxation of National Curriculum requirements, [to] create new incentives that may influence schools' curriculum policy” (Davies et al., 2003, p. 495).

More research is needed to demonstrate the benefit of a public educational system under the current model. Merrifield (2009), a critic of the current United States educational system, believed assessments weren't rigorous enough and argued that no assessment is truly accurate in establishing students' abilities, and that students' performance on even “the most trusted” assessments such as NAEP (which he deems as ‘easy’), are indicative of poor performance as few students earn scores of proficient or



advanced. Furthermore, he contended that the absolute value of students' scores is terribly low.

But some researchers contend that some assessments and assessment preparation actually benefit students. For example, simulated high-stakes testing for K-12 students may better prepare them for the college environment (Simulation Spreads, 2012). By using computer-based assessment processes that are currently implemented by medical schools, educators may gain more insight into students' learning abilities. In a similar study, Yeh (2006) examined the role of formative high-stakes testing in a Texas school system in guiding teachers in decision-making about curricula. He found that a balanced approach to assessment can provide a more targeted, differentiated curriculum that is beneficial to students.

By comparison, England's Department for Education (2011a) found teachers believed there to be too much oversight and bureaucracy in assessing the English National Curriculum. Some teachers expressed that they wanted a greater opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and professionalism, while fostering more balance between the skill set delineated by the English National Curriculum and a broad knowledge base directed at the whole child (Department for Education, 2011a). Eleven percent of respondents in the Department for Education's study contended there was a "lack of emphasis on preparations for assessments at Key Stage 4, and a greater attention to a prescriptive curriculum that was not appropriately challenging for high achieving students" (Department for Education, 2011a, p. 56). Meanwhile, 17% responded that "the current high stakes assessment system for the English National Curriculum does not provide for the multiple purposes assessment, such as formative and summative" (Department for Education, 2011a, p. 45). Eleven percent of respondents also upheld the

“country should not require high stakes standardized tests for student accountability, but rather should allow teachers to measure students’ performance through classroom based exams and performance on homework” (Department for Education, 2011a, p. 47).

### **Establishing Balanced Assessments for Validity in Accountability**

This literature review can merely reflect on the implications and end results of the Common Core standards based movement as in the United States (as it is embraced at the state level) that could lead to a national test (to earn, for example, government-funding) that does not measure a student’s ability, but ultimately one’s cultural capital. To fully study this problem, my goal in this dissertation is to conduct a comparative study of two schools—one in the English educational system (Surrey, England), and one in the United States (North Dakota) as England has embraced similar standardized intents and their end results.

When the United States Department of Education launched the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, there were vigorous attempts to reform the nation’s educational systems, ultimately leading to the Common Core Initiative. These attempts to improve the nation’s education are better understood upon deeper examination. Apple (2004) explained in his work, *Ideology and Curriculum* (2004), that in order to do so, one must first consider: “9a) the school as an institution, 9b) the knowledge forms, and (c) the educator him or herself” (para. 2). Henry Giroux’s (2001) work supported Apple’s sentiments in that he explained how educational theory that fundamentally challenges the status quo has all but disappeared from popular literature due to the notion that “Researchers have tacitly conceded or openly embraced the proposition that the interests of business should drive nearly all aspects of learning” (Preface, para. 3).

As business leaders have recently “joined forces” with educators to promote equity among students in preparation for their lives as dutiful citizens, both the United States and England have embraced a variety of formative and summative assessments as means to establish a baseline for students’ abilities on these standards. However, what are the best practices in ensuring accountability and validity in these assessments?

Stiggins (2008) delineated specific actions that are essential for establishing accountable and valid assessments:

1. Balance our assessments to meet information needs of all instructional decision makers.
  2. Continue to refine our academic achievement standards.
  3. Assure the quality of our classroom assessments.
  4. Turn the learners into assessors during their learning.
  5. Rethink our feedback strategies.
  6. Build on learner success as the universal motivator.
  7. Assure assessment literacy throughout our assessment systems. (p. 1)
- As educators (and politicians) are revisiting educational standards that drive

curricula, what, precisely, are we measuring on these assessments? How do we properly measure students’ abilities? Why do we measure students’ abilities? For whom are we measuring students’ abilities? Finally, how do we create assessment balance? Stiggins (2008) contended, “. . . testing serves valuable accountability purposes, literally decades of obsessive belief in and reliance on such assessments has revealed that they cannot do the job”( p. 1). In his work for the Assessment Training Institute, Stiggins et al. (2011) and his colleagues established an assessment paradigm in which educators must first consider an assessment’s design and purpose for assessing students to ensure they are creating accurate assessments. Educators also must ask themselves what learning targets do they hold for students, and whom will interpret and use the results of the assessment as a means for establishing accountability (Stiggins et al., 2011).

## **Creating “Systemness”**

While the road to improving assessments and the assessment process has been long and weary on both continents, the use of assessments in data aggregation to make informed decisions about curriculum has charted new ground. To best serve all of its constituents, a school district should embrace reform that upholds seven key concepts: “(a) a focus on motivation; (b) capacity building, with a focus on results; (c) learning in context; (d) changing context; (e) a bias for reflective action; (f) tri-level engagement; and (g) persistence and flexibility in staying the course” (Fullan, 2006, p. 8). If a school district and its constituents are serious in their efforts to truly implement change and identify a unified, goal for educational reform, a school district must meet three criteria: “(a) systemness, (b) positive movement, and (c) motivation” (Fullan, 2008, p. 275).

Because of the passing of NCLB, Taras (2009) noted, “Assessment for learning is increasingly part of accepted orthodoxy, with massive government funding in England, is central to national assessment in Wales, and an export to the USA.” (p. 1). Both North Dakota Department of Public Instruction’s adoption of the Common Core and the revision of the English National Curriculum may be an attempt toward positive movement by providing the semblance of a “systemness;” however, each school may approach these revised standards in its own fashion, and many educators and administration may feel that such movement is a “flavor of the month” as a greater nationwide effort toward educational reform.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

School systems in the United States and the United Kingdom have established common curricula based on state or national standards. The influence of policies directed toward an outcome-based education in both the United States and the United Kingdom placed a greater emphasis on assessments. Educators use common curricula as a basis for assessing students' learning through externally generated, standardized, summative assessments and daily in-class activities as a means to gauge students' improvement for student, teacher and school system accountability (Au, 2011; Stiggins, 2007, 2008). Research shows that these assessments can be biased or lack the potential ability to effectively measure students' abilities (Guskey, 2007). Meanwhile, research also finds an assessment imbalance that poses greater challenges in ascertaining accountability for school systems (Stiggins, 2008). However, do teachers, principals/headmasters, or curriculum directors support these findings? Do their experiences with the curriculum and its implementation affect their abilities to assess students' learning? Do the processes by which educators assess students' learning translate to a perceived inability to measure for accountability of students, educators, or educational systems? Because of the recent changes in federal, state, and local policy concerning how school systems assess students' learning in both North Dakota and Surrey, England, the goal of this study was to explain how, why, and for whom educators measure students' abilities and

determine whether school systems incorporate what Stiggins (2008) refers to as “balanced assessments.”

### **A Qualitative Study**

Roulston (2010) explained qualitative research, “. . . seeks to understand, promote change; or seeks to break apart and trouble—or deconstruct—current understandings of topics” (p. 76). With Roulston’s statement in mind, my comparative case study examined how schools use assessments to shape the schooling environment to better promote learning or serve as a form of accountability. By researching the historical and structural basis for the educational assessments that exist in the United States and comparing them to that of English trends, I provide recommendations to promote greater accountability through balanced assessments (Glesne, 2011). With a conceptual framework based on the research of the Assessment Training Institute and the Assessment Reform Group (2002), I gained insight on how assessments of educational standards can either help or hinder students’ opportunities to improve their learning while serving as form of accountability.

### **Researcher’s Background**

Maxwell (2005) explained that in a qualitative study, the “researcher *is* the instrument of the research” (pp. 37-38). By not acknowledging what the researcher knows through experience, one can “seriously damage the proposal’s credibility” Maxwell posited (2005, p. 38). Furthermore, Creswell (2007) noted:

. . . inquirers make certain assumptions . . . [that] consist of a stance toward the nature of reality (ontology), how the researcher knows what she or he knows (epistemology), the role of values in the research (axiology), the language of research (rhetoric), and the methods used in the process (methodology). (p. 16)

To provide clarity and credibility, my career in education which spans more than a decade, includes 7-12 principal internships in the greater Grand Forks area and teaching experiences in Grand Forks, North Dakota; Thompson, North Dakota; Bemidji, Minnesota; and in the Cherry Creek school system in Aurora, Colorado. I also taught in higher education as an adjunct professor and a graduate teaching assistant at both Minnesota State University Moorhead and North Dakota State University. In these experiences, I served on a variety of committees, including the school improvement team and AdvancED accreditation teams in Forman, North Dakota (2013); Cavalier, North Dakota (2012); and Harvey, North Dakota (2010). I also led professional development on Pyramid Response to Intervention and implemented best practices through professional learning communities, comprised of English teachers, administrators, and curriculum directors.

My varied experiences with the assessment process included proctoring standardized assessments including the ACT, PLAN, CSAP, NDSA, NWEA MAP, as well as conducting my own formative and summative classroom-based assessments. In 2010, I served on a committee that reviewed the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade NDSA English assessment hosted by ETS in Bismarck. The committee and I made recommendations for test questions, including large scale changes such as the omission of specific questions and sections (due to a perceived bias or students' lack of cultural experience), to smaller scale changes in diction or syntax (for grade appropriateness). I truly enjoyed the experience, as I felt I held an important role in ensuring the test would more accurately determine my students' proficiency.

That same year (2010), I reviewed the Common Core State Standards and provided recommendations to officials at the Department of Public Instruction based on

my findings. Initially, I was skeptical as I found that much of the language in the CCC hinged on verbosity and lacked the attention to specific concepts as the current North Dakota State Standards. While I knew that the differences in the current standards and the CCC for the secondary level were marginal, I recognized the differences were far more drastic for the elementary level and voiced such concerns about districts' ability to effectively implement such standards if they were inappropriate and seemingly unachievable for students. I was concerned with NCLB (2001) and feared that while many states were readily embracing such standards, that the CCC would usher in more stringent measures for accountability and would potentially cut off funding and educational opportunities for all students.

To clarify, these experiences with a standardized education and the assessment process informed my understanding of participants' perspectives and my observations throughout the course of this study (Maxwell, 2005).

### **Topic Selection**

As a researcher, I understand the importance of recognizing the difference among my personal, practical, and intellectual goals for this comparative case study (Maxwell, 2005). Initially, my interest in researching the effects of common curricula was *personal*: When the State of North Dakota began its inquiry of the Common Core State Standards in 2010, I received a copy from my principal with the instruction to review them for potential implementation. While reviewing the 9-12 standards, I was surprised by the similarities in content, but the differences in language. As referenced in Chapter II and echoed in my framework for this study, one reason many states chose to adopt the Common Core was a perceived need for common language and content expectations. Ultimately, North Dakota leaders implemented a plan to adopt these standards in July



2011 and officially introduced them to students during the 2013-2014 academic year. The State's preoccupation with the Common Core drove my own preoccupation, and as I read more about the initiation of common curricula in other countries, including the United Kingdom, I began to question North Dakota's position in its alliance with the Council of Chief State School Officers. Initially, I wanted to study the revision of the state's curriculum as implemented at the district level. However, I soon realized that in order to do so, my study would require more longitudinal research that would surpass my abilities within the frame of a dissertation.

I continued to read literature on the topic of common curricula and my research goal became far more *practical* (Maxwell, 2005). Over the course of a year, I prepared an initial literature review and discussed my findings with my advisor, Dr. Pauline Stonehouse. With her guidance, I examined my own curiosity with the Common Core and pinpointed my interest: accountability. I questioned whether common curricula would provide greater accountability, as the United States school systems already were feeling the effects of NCLB (2001). My reading provided insight into the effects of the National Curriculum in Australia, England, and Wales as stakeholders perceived a change in the climate and culture of educational systems.

With Dr. Stonehouse's guidance, I continued to hone my readings and reflect on my findings to develop my initial research questions and conceptual framework; herein, the goal of my comparative study became more *intellectually* inspired (Maxwell, 2005). As I began to understand the intent of the Common Core in the United States, I began to understand that the challenges faced by school systems weren't in adopting a new common curriculum itself, but how adherence to the curriculum, measured through high-stakes testing, affected school systems. If school systems in North Dakota and elsewhere

are to adopt common curricula, I wanted to know how they intended to evaluate the effectiveness of such a change. A program evaluation for accreditation would be not only necessary, but highly imperative for school systems, especially those that had to answer to government agencies who sought a return on investment of public funds. Hence, these three goals—personal, practical, and intellectual—merged as I decided to focus my literature review on the historical and structural lens to better understand stakeholders’ perceptions on assessing students’ learning through balanced assessments for accountability (Glesne, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

Because my research is qualitative in nature, the results of this comparative case study are what Mohr (1982) referred to as a “process theory.” As a qualitative study, my goal was to *understand* the context and process of assessing students’ learning—namely, the role of Assessment for Learning so that I may better *accomplish* a balanced assessment process (Maxwell, 2005).

With my practical research goals in mind, I reflected on the ATI and ARG frameworks to ascertain what elements were comparable—if the A/L movement was gaining wider acceptance in the United States because of the influences of English researchers, I wanted to understand the implications of this approach. In so doing, I constructed my own conceptual framework based on the results of my literature review, which led me to develop three essential research questions based on Stiggins’ (2008, 2010) research on understanding and establishing balanced assessments. Because this study is comparative, these questions are *generic*, rather than particularistic, with the objective of better understanding the assessment *process* (Maxwell, 2005). In order to better understand the parameters for constructing balanced assessments, I needed to paint

a picture of the *phenomena* surrounding the assessment process within the classroom setting (Maxwell, 2005). Hence, by answering the first question, I knew that I would better understand the parameters of the study and increase my validity in answering my second and third questions (Maxwell, 2005):

1. What are secondary (students ages 14-18) educators' beliefs about what, why, how, and for whom school systems are assessing students' learning?
2. What is the difference between educators' beliefs about assessment and the processes by which they assess students' learning?
3. Do educators perceive a balance of assessments of students' learning?

### **Interview Questions**

To pinpoint how school systems use assessments, I followed the protocol set forth in my Institutional Review Board approval, which is based on the methods delineated by Maxwell (2005). Stewart and Cash (2003) stressed the importance of creating neutral interview questions that do not potentially reveal the researcher's bias. My interview questions open-ended and conversational with follow-up prompts, to ascertain participants' perceptions of the assessment process (Creswell, 2007; Stewart & Cash, 2003). Some sample interview questions included (see Appendix B for all questions):

1. What kinds of assessments do you use?
2. How frequently do you assess?
3. How do you know if a student has achieved success?
4. What do you do if a student fails?
5. What role do assessments have in your overall educational (strategic) plan?

While I interviewed a variety of stakeholders who held various positions within the school systems' hierarchy, I did not let my role as a researcher, or for that matter, as a

teacher, affect my ability to ask probing questions (Glesne, 2011). I approached each participant interview as an “anticipatory learner”—I anticipated each participants’ responses based on my literature review; however, I maintained a certain degree of naïveté for each situation, allowing the participant to share with me his/her experiences and perceptions (Glesne, 2011). I attempted to create a non-threatening environment that was also probing (Glesne, 2011). For example, I initially observed teachers in their classroom settings to gain insight into their pedagogy and assessment practices, prior to their interviews. Because I was familiar with their teaching styles, I found many of the teachers were far more relaxed about the interview process. However, on one occasion, one participant elected to forego the interview after she witnessed a brief conversation between her administrator and me. Upon reflection, I realized that I may have lost her trust in that moment, for she may have been worried about with whom I intended to share the results of my study.

During the participant interviews, I not only asked my set research questions, but because qualitative research is emergent (Creswell, 2007), but I also asked follow-up questions, including “restatement probes,” that rephrased participant’s responses; “reflective probes,” that clarified participant’s responses; and “mirror probes” that summarized participants’ responses (Stewart & Cash, 2003). By doing so, I conducted inherent member-checking within my interview process, ensuring greater validity (Creswell, 2007) and trustworthiness of my interpretations (Glesne, 2011).

### **Site Selection**

Glesne (2011) discussed the “dynamics of field relations” as maintaining a careful balance on a tightrope between friendship and rapport with participants. She noted that a study may result in biased data due to a skewed selection process in which a researcher is

unaware of a propensity to eliminate participants because he/she may overly identify with them. Meanwhile, Glesne acknowledged that the opportunity for valid data also may be unreachable due to specific alliances within the field of study.

Because this is a qualitative, comparative study, I knew that I could not randomly select two schools to study (Maxwell, 2005). I also was concerned about orchestrating an overly structured approach when selecting sites and participants. I wanted to create an environment that was comfortable for my participants so that I may gain their trust and they would be honest in their responses to my questions (Maxwell, 2005). At the same time, I wanted to ensure I afforded enough flexibility for truly emergent data analysis, rather than constructing the opportunity for “tunnel vision” in which I would be unaware of aspects of the study for further exploration (Maxwell, 2005). However, because my study is comparative, I wanted to ensure that my *sampling*—each individual site (in North Dakota and in Surrey, England)—would be comparable in size, enrollment, demographics, and other classifying details (Maxwell, 2005). I analyze data to understand the *particular phenomena* within each individual site comparatively, and would make my recommendations based on these findings (Maxwell, 2005).

Creswell (2007) identified a series of goals for “purposeful selection,” but as Maxwell (2005) suggested, four of these goals have greater bearing on my study: “representativeness, heterogeneity, deliberate examination, and reasoned attributions for differences” (pp. 89-90). Maxwell (2005) noted, “While such comparisons are less common in qualitative than in quantitative research, comparative designs are often used in multicase qualitative studies” (p. 90). My study is a multi-case study in which I needed a comparative design that established a certain degree of heterogeneity and

representativeness in which I could compare phenomena for deeper clarity and understanding.

Once my proposal for research was approved by the Institutional Review Board and I had completed the necessary paperwork, I established initial contact with two schools—one in North Dakota and one in England. I chose a larger school in North Dakota that prides itself as, in the words of its curriculum director “a beacon institution,” for its attention to and implementation of current educational trends. I followed the school district’s protocol by submitting the necessary forms that explained the nature of my qualitative research, and in doing so, I gained access to conduct research at one of its three high schools in April 2012.

According to the secondary data—documents I received from the school and the school district’s website—the North Dakota school is one of three high schools in a district that serves approximately 8,000 students and has more than 1,000 employees. Comparable to other districts in North Dakota, this district has predominately Caucasian students who live within households that are low- to middle-level socioeconomically. This particular school was built in 1967 to serve 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students, but was remodeled in 1995 to accommodate 9<sup>th</sup>- through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students. This school has roughly 1,150 students who are served by 150 highly qualified faculty and staff. Among them nearly 50 hold graduate degrees.

Within this North Dakota community, this school is perceived to house a student body that is more “well-to-do” and “academically capable” than the other two high schools in the school system that are located in working class neighborhoods and/or provide an “alternative-style” education in which students have the option of earning a traditional high school diploma in a “non-traditional” setting.

Meanwhile, I established communication with a school system in Surrey, England in June 2012. Students of this system made up roughly similar demographics to that of the system in North Dakota. I soon discovered by reviewing secondary data received from the school and its website that this school is one of the oldest English schools and has a long-standing tradition of serving students of Surrey. Under nationwide reform efforts, the school earned Academy status in July 2011 and established a partnership with a struggling local school system as a part of a greater strategic plan to improve both schools. The school system employs roughly 200 faculty and staff, who serve roughly 1,950 students, of which there are more than 300 students in each age group and nearly 450 are in the sixth form. According to the school's website, it has received numerous educational awards for its innovations and Ofsted inspection reviewers have held this school in high regard, noting its "openness and self-critical approach."

### **Participant Selection**

To best answer my research questions, I knew that I needed to consider who would best understand the assessment process within each school system. I mulled over Maxwell's (2005) sample data-planning matrix to determine where I would find the data and whom I would contact. I decided the best method to acquire the information I needed was to observe the learning/assessing environment within individual classroom settings and interview stakeholders who are directly involved in the assessment process. While I afforded a certain "degree of pre-structuring" to better establish comparative data, I also afforded room for flexibility and the likelihood of emergent data (Maxwell, 2005). One method of doing so included observations of the general educational environment at each locale, considering areas where students and faculty congregate, such as hallways and lunchrooms, courtyards and parking lots to better understand the

climate and culture of each school system (and better interpret the data stemming from each of these classrooms).

After gaining access to one school district in North Dakota and one in England, administrators from each school helped me identify potential participants through a *criterion-based* self-selection process (Maxwell, 2005). Administrators communicated with potential participants that fell into one of three specific categories: classroom teacher, administrator, or curriculum director. On my behalf, the administrator initially contacted individuals either in-person or via e-mail, providing them with copies of my abstract, an explanation of my research intent, and the preapproval forms from the school system. Participants who were willing to contribute to my research contacted the administrator, who then provided me or my advisor, Dr. Pauline Stonehouse, with the necessary contact information for follow up.

Based on the parameters of this study, delineated within my Institutional Review Board approval, all people (teachers, administrators, and curriculum directors) who agreed to an observation and/or interview were selected as participants in this study. This sample proved to be exhaustive in that I gained access to a variety of perspectives from people with varied demographics (Maxwell, 2005). For example, participants included everything from teachers who were new to the profession to teachers who are nearing retirement. While conducting my study, I also met other school officials, faculty, staff, and students who gave me a general impression of the school system as they made small talk while performing their daily routines, but did not explicitly provide me with an interview or allow me to observe them in the educational setting. Rather, the conversations we had provided information that enhanced the data resulting from selected participants (Slavin, 2007). In Chapter IV I provide excerpts of these observations and



interviews, and to ensure anonymity for each of my participants, I have given them pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection**

Maxwell (2005) clarified that “research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding” (p. 92). To conduct my study, I initially interviewed a North Dakota principal, face-to-face, to gain insight into the school culture, climate, and educational objectives and purposes of the district before I observed and interviewed four teachers. This process helped me hone my interview questions that would afford me greater opportunity in data triangulation (Maxwell, 2005).

Subsequently, I interviewed and observed high school English-Language Arts teachers within their classroom settings. These teachers taught students that are age appropriate for college preparatory testing (i.e., the ACT). Though they are few in number, these teachers represented a wide range of experiences and educational philosophies. Furthermore, they taught to a variety of abilities. For example, one educator solely taught a modified curriculum for students with learning disabilities, another taught traditional students, and another taught gifted and talented students. Meanwhile, each teacher represented a different grade level, and/or a unique educational philosophy. Finally, each teacher represented an educator in a different stage of his or her career. After I conducted some initial coding on my observations and field notes, I interviewed the district’s curriculum director who further provided data triangulation.

Comparatively, I followed the same format for collecting data in Surrey, England. I initially observed the school system’s headmaster on the first day of my study to establish the culture and climate of the school prior to my observations and interviews of

four year-10, A-level, or sixth form teachers (comparable to the freshman to senior level in the United States, or 15- to 18-years-old) who taught English-Language Arts, the curriculum director, and school improvement team. Similar to my experiences with the educational setting in North Dakota, the teachers I observed and interviewed in Surrey, England also represented a variety of educational philosophies, varied in the number of years of service to the profession, and taught students who ranged in their levels of ability. My experiences in Surrey also followed a similar line to that of my research in North Dakota, as I found that my interviews with the curriculum director and school improvement team also created a triangulation of data, furthering my validity (Maxwell, 2005).

In both instances, I found that because I also teach English-Language Arts and have a great deal of experience with assessing students' learning, I was able to establish rapport, and trust with my participants—I was able to “fit in” (Glesne, 2011, p. 141). Keenly aware of this, I ensured that I was sensitive to *reflexivity* and *subjectivity* while collecting data, observing how our participant-researcher interactions within the setting could potentially contribute to my findings (Glesne, 2011). To clarify, I bracketed my experiences to ensure that my own perceptions did not influence the data I collected (Creswell, 2007).

While observing each teacher, I took time-stamped logs of teacher-student interactions to understand—much like a journalist—the “who, what, when, where, and why” of the assessment process (Stake, 2010). I portrayed each classroom setting using thick, rich descriptions of the environment and the interactions (Biklen & Casella, 2007). Though I was not a “participant observer” in the strictest form (participating in the direct instruction of lessons or assessments alongside the teacher and students), I acknowledged

my presence in the classroom setting did present itself several times and may have influenced my results (Stake, 2010). During the observation process, I initially found “interpretive data” that I knew would directly answer some of my research questions; however, it was not until I conducted follow-up face-to-face interviews of these teachers, that I found “aggregative data” through triangulation and coding of other interviews and field notes (Stake, 2010).

Furthermore, to better understand the balanced assessment process, I reviewed sample standardized assessments and students’ performance data (Stiggins, 2008). For example, I examined trend data from standardized tests such as the A-Level, ACT, NWEA MAP and ND State Assessment, and PISA. I also inquired about individual classroom data, and queried educators about their impressions of this data that guided me in my interpretations of the results.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2011) delineated six specific steps to analyze and interpret qualitative data: organizing data, reviewing and coding data, building themes through description, reporting findings, interpreting findings, and validating accuracy. These steps informed my data collection and analysis.

#### **Step 1: Organizing Data**

To conduct data analysis on my research, I began by carefully transcribing my data myself. To more accurately capture the participants’ feelings, I documented long pauses, phone call interruptions or other disturbances as well as verbal hedging (“ahs” and “uhms”). I also included my own bracketed on-the-spot impressions (Creswell, 2011). Then, I prepared and organized my observations, interviews, and field notes based on the source of the information (Creswell, 2007). For example, I grouped like

with like—all North Dakota data went into one folder, all Surrey data into another. From there, I clustered my information based on participants. Each participant had a file of information that contained his/her interview and observation notes.

### **Step 2: Reviewing and Coding Data**

After I transcribed my recorded face-to-face interviews, I used elements of the phenomenological and ethnographical approaches of data analysis on my comparative study (Creswell, 2007). I began by reflecting on my experiences within each educational setting through a series of field notes (Creswell, 2007). Then, I conducted a hand-analysis of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2011) by structurally coding the interviews, observations, and field notes (Saldana, 2011), looking for significant statements or themes that demonstrated patterns that I could deconstruct and reconstruct, leading to “naturalistic generalizations” (Creswell, 2007, p. 163). Many of the codes I assigned to the data were directly lifted from the transcriptions of participants’ interviews and in the participants’ own words, or “in vivo” and were based on activities, processes, beliefs, or contexts during each observation and interview (Creswell, 2011). I assigned each of these codes a different color and constructed a codebook as a reference for each assigned code’s color and data sample (Creswell, 2011).

### **Step 3: Building Themes through Description**

To obtain a general sense of my coded data, I read through my transcripts several times to explore connections in codes and reflect on the broader meaning of each participant’s observations and interviews (Creswell, 2011). With the integrated framework I constructed based on my literature review and the frameworks of ATI and ARG, I structurally coded my data through horizontal analysis to develop three themes, or domains (Creswell, 2007). As a comparative study, my data presented the

perspectives a “small number of historically comparable cases of specific actors” to develop a clearer understanding of these three domains and consequent taxonomies (Creswell, 2007, p. 27).



Figure 3.1. The Transitional Process for Moving From Codes to Assertions.

After conducting brief, follow-up interviews, member-checking, and a second round of hand-coding, I combined smaller codes into categories, or taxonomies (Figure 3.1) (Saldana, 2011). In doing so, I was able to describe and contextualize my findings within my conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1.1) (Creswell, 2011).

#### **Step 4: Interpreting Findings**

Data interpretation of this comparative case study followed the data analysis spiral presented by Creswell (2007), moving from collecting data, to managing data, reading data, interpreting data, and visualizing data. This truly qualitative process of moving in “analytic circles”, led me back to my literature review findings time and again, as it informed and shaped my interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, I reviewed secondary source data including documentation on each school’s policy regarding the assessment process that complied with state and national requirements (Creswell, 2007). This content analysis provided a broader understanding of the culture, climate, policies and demographics of each school (Slavin, 2007).

#### **Step 5: Reporting Findings**

To better understand how these themes interrelated between each locale, I constructed a concept map and comparison table to analyze similarities (and differences)

in codes and subsequent themes (Creswell, 2011). I have included these tables within Chapter IV. Also included in Chapter IV is a detailed explanation of these themes that emerged through deeper analysis and have provided examples of participants' perspectives on the assessment process.

### **Step 6: Validating Accuracy**

The sixth step in the data analysis process outlined by Creswell (2011) is validating for accuracy, which I explain in greater detail in the next section.

#### **Validity**

To best understand the culture and climate of each school system, I observed each school system in both North Dakota and Surrey over the course of a week. Though I cannot accurately depict this as true immersion as pure ethnographic studies are wont to do, my "prolonged engagement" and "persistent observation" provided me with general acceptance within the educational setting at both locales, affording a specific level of comfort to as to allow for congeniality and political conversation without fear or hesitation on behalf of my participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 207).

While collecting data, I took detailed notes and tape-recorded interviews (when participants agreed to do so) while onsite at each respective school (Creswell, 2007). The rich, thick descriptions therein provided a certain degree of transferability to future studies (Creswell, 2007). I also took extensive field notes that required ongoing reflection and provided an additional form of triangulation with participant interviews and observations (Creswell, 2007) to establish internal validity (Slavin, 2007). During this process, I frequently conducted member-checking with my participants to ensure I was accurately documenting participants' perceptions and clarifying unanswered questions (Creswell, 2007). Finally, I conducted an external audit of my coding process

by having a professor and classmate review my codes, aiding in a more accurate interpretation of my data (Creswell, 2007). Because I first conducted my research in North Dakota, I used this knowledge to help me shape my questions that would help me conduct a comparative analysis with that of the school system in Surrey, England.

In addition to interviewing and observing teachers and principal/headmaster, curriculum director and/or school improvement team, I observed students outside of the classroom (in hallways before and after classes and in the commons areas) to better understand teachers' and students perceptions of the educational setting. To ensure validity in my findings of teacher and administrator perceptions, I took extensive field notes and/or tape recorded my interviews, and time-stamped notes of my observations to better make sense of my ongoing field notes (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, to ensure validity, as I reviewed my research, I continued to conduct member checks and followed up with participants via e-mail or by phone. I spoke with these interviewees on the details of my observations to carefully construct my audit trail, tracking my findings and delineating pitfalls (Emerson, 1995). Finally, I continued to reflect on my findings by comparing educators' perceptions against the policies and practices provided me through the schools' websites, student and faculty handbooks, and other educator-generated materials (Slavin, 2007).

### **Researcher Subjectivities and Ethics**

As an English teacher with teaching experience that spans more than a decade, I was concerned that my classroom observations and interviews could reveal a certain level of bias toward a standardized curriculum and best practices (Glesne, 2011). However, I maintained sensitivity and reflexivity toward my interpretation of participants' perspectives during classroom observations and subsequent interviews (Glesne, 2011).

For example, because I understood my comments may be leading or affect my data, I withheld my own perspectives as I actively listened to participants' responses to my research questions. I also ensured I was on track in my observations and interviews by frequently conducting probing questions about the scenarios I observed and asked the teachers calculating questions that clarified their overall objectives and perspectives about the learning process, including "restatement probes," that rephrased participant's responses; "reflective probes," that clarified participant's responses; and "mirror probes" that summarized participants' responses (Stewart & Cash, 2003). By doing so, I conducted inherent member-checking within my interview process, ensuring greater validity (Creswell, 2007) and trustworthiness of my interpretations (Glesne, 2011). I also attempted to maintain a non-threatening environment that accounted for my participation as an influence on the outcome of my data—while a certain degree of "reactivity" is inescapable, I again acknowledged my reflexivity in the situation (i.e. I could affect my data through my presence or communication) by attempting to limit my interactions with the participants while conducting classroom observations (Maxwell, 2005). I informed my participants that they may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, and provided them with my contact information as well as that of my advisor Dr. Stonehouse, should they have any questions with each signed permission form. While one participant chose to forego the follow-up interview after I observed her classroom (perhaps as a result of a friendly interaction she witnessed between her principal and me), she did not choose to withdraw from the study entirely, and so I was able to use her data as well. In sum, interactions with my participants were highly professional, though relaxed and conversational—desirable aspects of sound qualitative research (Slavin, 2007).



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

The current educational climate maintains a focus on the need for educational reform. Globally, standardized assessments of students' learning have increasingly become an important tool in establishing accountability of students, teachers, and school systems. School systems in the United States and the United Kingdom have established common curricula based on state or national standards. The influence of policies directed toward an outcome-based education in both the United States and the United Kingdom placed a greater emphasis on assessments of students' learning on the common curricula through externally generated, standardized, summative assessments and daily in-class activities. Schools use these assessments as a means to gauge students' improvement for student, teacher and school system accountability (Au, 2011; Stiggins, 2007, 2008).

My goal for this study is to understand educators' beliefs about the assessment process as a driving force in decision making. These perceptions provide clarity for educators in both the United States and the United Kingdom in effectively implementing a balanced approach to assessments and using results to make informed decisions about curriculum instruction and accountability of the educational process.

## **Data Interpretation**

I adopted six specific steps to analyze and interpret qualitative data: organizing, reviewing, and coding, building themes through description, reporting findings, interpreting findings, and validating accuracy (Creswell, 2011). These steps informed my data collection and analysis, and serve as a basis for organizing and reporting my findings.

### **Organizing Data**

At each location, I tape-recorded several interviews and took extensive time-stamped notes of observations. I collected sample lesson materials, assessments, rubrics, and student data to help me understand the culture and climate of the school. While in England, I also wrote extensive field notes each day to help me organize the wealth of information I was gaining from the cultural experience. After observing and interviewing each participant, I transcribed the recorded interviews myself to ensure accuracy, validity, and immerse myself in the data. To more accurately capture the participants' feelings, I documented long pauses, phone call interruptions, signs of discomfort or question-diversion, and other disturbances. I also included my own bracketed on-the-spot impressions (Creswell, 2011). I prepared and organized my observations, interviews, and field notes based on the source of the information by creating separate folders for Greenbriar High School and Whitmoor College that contained separate documents for each participant (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, 1995).

### **Reviewing and Coding Data**

I coded each participant's classroom observation and interview separately by hand, often labeling each code through *in vivo* terms (Saldana, 2011). I also assigned each code a different color, which allowed me to more easily see them at a glance.

Through this analytical process, several codes emerged from the qualitative data. Tables 4.2 and 4.6 provide sample codes that reflected the local, state, and national educational initiatives, such as an attention to the adoption of the Common Core in the North Dakota or the influence of Ofsted evaluations in England. Other codes revealed themes such as a perceived need for school and district-wide professional development—for instance “Focus.”

### **Building Themes through Description**

To obtain a general sense of my coded data, I read through my transcripts several times to explore connections between codes and reflect on the broader meaning of each participant’s observations and interviews (Creswell, 2011; Saldana, 2011). After conducting brief, follow-up interviews, member-checking, and a second round of hand-coding, I continued to analyze my codes by grouping them into similar content and subject matter for each location (North Dakota and Surrey, England) and found parallels and contrasts among each participant (Saldana, 2011). In doing so, I was able to describe and contextualize my findings within the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1.1) as well as the matrices that are explained further in Chapter V (Creswell, 2011).

### **Interpreting and Reporting Findings**

The process of interpreting data for this study moved in what Creswell (2007) defines as “analytic circles” in which I collected, managed, read, interpreted, and visualized data. Time and again, I reflected on my literature review to inform interpretations. For clarification, I reviewed secondary source data including documentation on each school’s policy regarding the assessment process that complied with state and national requirements (Creswell, 2007). This content analysis provided a broader understanding of the culture, climate, policies and demographics of each school

and helped me to interpret the emergent codes, categories, themes and assertions (Saldana, 2011; Slavin, 2007).

### **Validating Accuracy**

To ensure validity, I reviewed my extensive field notes; interviews; and observations, and continued to conduct member checks by following up with participants via e-mail or by phone (Emerson, 1995). Finally, I continued to reflect on my findings by comparing educators' perceptions against the policies and practices provided me through the schools' websites, student and faculty handbooks, and other educator-generated materials (Slavin, 2007).

As I compared codes and notes on each participant, I was able to find parallels—or internal validity—by which I constructed my categories and subsequent themes (Slavin, 2007). For example, North Dakota teachers I interviewed and observed, such as Gene Smiley, indicated a concern over the administration's view of their inadequacy in assessing students' learning—this concern echoed Curriculum Director Kurt Brown's sentiments regarding assessment balance, and this concern also paralleled some of the experiences of the teachers I interviewed and observed in Surrey, England.

Meanwhile, to gain an appreciation of the culture and climate of Whitmoor College and the English school setting, my research in the country spanned over 10 days, with five days on-site at the school during the work-week, as well as two weekends to observe and participate in the English culture. Traveling with a small group of Educational Leadership classmates from UND, my experiences included visiting some of the common tourist sites, such as the London Eye and the Globe Theatre, as well as taking in the sights and sounds of little shops along the main thoroughfare in Guildford and Oxford. Each morning I would reflect on the previous day's experiences with my

host family. Because my host family had ties to Whitmoor College, some of these conversations led to political discussions about the English school system and greater clarification on Whitmoor College and the role of local education association (Creswell, 2007).

While collecting data at the school, I took detailed notes and tape-recorded interviews while onsite at each respective school (Creswell, 2007). The rich, thick descriptions provided me a clear picture of the educational setting and pedagogy (Creswell, 2007). I also took extensive field notes that I triangulated with participant interviews and observations (Creswell, 2007) to establish internal validity (Slavin, 2007). During this process, I frequently conducted member-checking, including meal times with my host family, as well as with the group of educational leadership peers with whom I was traveling. In doing so, I was able to clarify unanswered questions (Creswell, 2007; Slavin, 2007). Finally, I conducted an external audit of my coding process by having one professor and classmate review my codes, aiding in a more accurate interpretation of my data (Creswell, 2007).

### **North Dakota Results**

Situated between a neighborhood of homes constructed in the early 1980s to the north and a mobile-home park to the south, “Greenbriar” High School with its beige brick and numerous windows is one of three high schools in a district that serves more than 7,000 students and has more than 1,000 employees (according to the district’s website). Comparable to other districts in North Dakota, this district has predominately Caucasian students who live within households that are low- to middle-level socioeconomically (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2012a). According to the school’s website, this particular school was built in 1967 to serve 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students,

but was remodeled in 1995 to accommodate 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students. This school has approximately 1,150 students who are served by 150 “highly qualified” faculty and staff (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2012a). Among them nearly 50 hold graduate degrees, according to the school’s website and promotional materials. This school resides within a district that received the America’s Promise Alliance’s 100 Best Communities for Young People award four times for its attention to providing educational programs that meet the needs of the “Whole Child,” (ASCD, 2012) or a school that is committed to providing a climate and culture in which students are challenged, engaged, healthy, safe, and sustainable (ASCD, 2014).

Within this North Dakota community, this school is perceived by the employees I interviewed to house a student body that is more “well-to-do” and “academically capable” than the other two high schools in the school system that are located in working class neighborhoods and/or provide an “alternative-style” education in which students have the option of earning a traditional high school diploma in a “non-traditional” setting. According to the Department of Public Instruction’s School Plant Profile (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2012a), the school had an 88.4% graduation rate compared to 79.6% across the school district.

According to the promotional material on the Greenbriar High School website, the mission of the school is to “educate all students in a safe and respectful environment.” In so doing, the school offers a “comprehensive education” that is accredited by AdvancED (formerly the North Central Accreditation Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges). The school is compliant with North Dakota Century Code 15.1-21-02. requirements by providing four core content areas (English-Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies) with Advanced Placement classes offered in each of these

areas to “address students’ ability to successfully develop learning, thinking, and life skills as critical elements of student achievement” (AdvancED, 2014b).

The school also offers career and technical programs including health careers, childcare, building and mechanical trades, and computer software and networking. Students may also select from courses in Latin, German, French, and Spanish.

Comparable to other state schools of its size, this school also offers competitive fine arts in music, drama, speech, and debate, in addition to its athletic offerings such as football, basketball, volleyball, hockey or wrestling and other extra-curricular activities or clubs.

The school is Americans with Disabilities Act compliant, offering education programs for students with special needs (according to the school’s website).

For this case study, I observed and interviewed four teachers, one administrator, and one curriculum director who held positions within the same school in North Dakota in April 2012 (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. North Dakota Participants.

Participant’s Name	Title	Grade Level	Classroom Demographics	Interview or Observation
Dr. Jared White	Principal	NA	NA	Interview
Gene Smiley	ELA Teacher/ Department Chair	Freshman	General	Both
Valerie Smallbeck	ELA Teacher	Junior	Special Needs	Both
Allison Shriver	ELA Teacher	Sophomore	General	Both
Susan Jones	ELA Teacher	Freshman	General	Observation*
Dr. Kurt Brown	Curriculum Director	NA	NA	Interview

\* After observing me converse with another principal, this participant chose to forego the follow-up interview.

### **Moving from Codes to Assertions**

To obtain a general sense of my coded data, I read through my transcripts several times to explore connections in codes and reflect on the broader meaning of each participant’s observations and interviews (Creswell, 2011). As I worked, I began to

spread out my data, noting similarities and differences in codes among my North Dakota participants (and later, among all participants). When comparing the frequency of codes and subsequent categories and themes, I compared the data generated through interviews and observations of each participant. Table 4.3 demonstrates four sample codes that are represented through data obtained by each participant. Through further analysis, I began to notice commonalities among the content represented by each code. For example, the codes “Common Core,” “Character Education,” and “21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning” all explained the standard expectations that the school upheld for students’ learning. I used these commonalities to build color-coded categories represented in Table 4.2. In this example, these three codes merged to develop the theme of content standards. Drawing from data obtained through the interviews and observations, these emergent themes suggested three assertions that the school assesses students’ learning for (a) standardization, (b) systemization, and (c) accountability. For increased validity in developing my assertions, I analyzed these codes and themes by triangulating data not only among participants in each location, but also between North Dakota and Surrey (Creswell, 2011). While the theoretical matrix for each location (explained in Chapter V) reveals different influences for each assertion, both North Dakota and Surrey reflected similar assertions.



Table 4.2. North Dakota Codes, Categories, Themes, and Assertions.

North Dakota Codes	North Dakota Categories	North Dakota Themes	North Dakota Assertions
Common Assessments	Common Core	Content Standards	The school assesses students' learning for standardization.
Common Core Accountability Systematized Response to Intervention	Character Education 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learning		
Professional Development Professional Learning Community Character Education 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learning Focus	Common Assessments Systematized Response to Intervention Professional Learning Community	Organizational Structure	The school assesses students' learning as a part of its systemization.
AdvancED	Accountability	Highly Qualified	The school assesses students' learning for accountability.
	Professional Development Focus AdvancED		

### Common Codes Explained

Table 4.2 provides examples of codes that emerged into color-coded categories and subsequent themes and assertions. These themes reflected the local, regional, and national educational initiatives, such as a desire to develop an effective system-wide plan to improve instructional practices through professional development and evaluation to promote student achievement. For a more detailed list containing data samples, see the Appendix.

**Common Core.** Because the school district was preparing for the transition to the Common Core Standards, many of the participants mentioned the preparations they were making to account for the change in pedagogy and assessment practices. A first-

year teacher Allison Shriver said that she felt challenged to meet all of her students' needs alongside the school's expectations, noting, "So you just kind of get bogged down maybe and you just are going through the motions just to get the experience and get the curriculum under your belt."

Meanwhile, when preparing students for assessments, Gene Smiley explained the importance of keeping learning objectives clear, so that the students who have learning disabilities are "still going to understand, but then those that are more able to answer and are able to go deeper into the subject, they're going to be challenged too."

The ability to differentiate within the curriculum was a theme that also emerged from participants' references to the Common Core. Three of the four teachers discussed how they had met with other teachers to discuss best practices in pedagogy including differentiation, required texts, and the development of common assessments in preparation for the curriculum change.

**Common Assessments.** There were several participants who commented on developing district-wide common assessments of students' learning. While some of the teachers were hesitant of the process, the curriculum director and principal indicated it was necessary to ensure that teachers were specifically teaching the required standards. "Every teacher will have access to this curriculum map. . . . And then common assessments will be tied in with each one," Principal Jared White explained.

As a first-year teacher, Allison Shriver explained why she would support common curriculum and assessments:

I think if things were a little more consistent, (pauses) it would be easier to go and ask for help for ideas or what should I do. But everybody is sort of all over the place in how they like to do things. If I knew that I need to teach this paper. Or that no matter what, you need to read this novel, I think that would take out a lot of those questions, as you are working toward that same goal.

While Shriver envisioned a professional learning community in which she and her colleagues could strive for similar goals and effectively collaborate on school curriculum and assessment initiatives, not every teacher supported her views. For example, Valerie Smallbeck explained how PLCs had recently fallen apart within the school:

We still meet together in small groups and do as much as we can. To bounce things—my dream would be say Tuesday, everybody who teaches English I, we'll meet and we'll share. Each person signed up and would share two things that have been used in our classroom. And that's what we did two years ago. But then an outsider took over our PLCs and we did not get to do that anymore.

This “outsider,” she revealed, was Dr. Kurt Brown the curriculum director. With his influence, she explained, the PLCs moved from conversations about pedagogy to creating lists of vocabulary words students should learn. She explained the problem further, noting her particular students' learning challenges with such a curriculum and her ability to effectively assess them on such a curriculum, “I can give them the weekly vocabulary test, two of them will not pass it. But if I read it to them, they will pass it. The different learning styles.”

**Accountability.** Many participants mentioned the need for accountability during their interviews. Principal Jared White acknowledged teachers had varying reactions to the concept of common assessments, noting, “When I first started talking about common assessments . . . the young *uncomfortableness* of ‘now I'm going to be compared’ or ‘Now this is going to go into my teacher evaluation.’ ”

Curriculum Director Kurt Brown indicated there was a greater need for accountability among his teaching staff: “Nobody has been held accountable. We still have, by and large, this notion of independent contracting in various classrooms.” Rather than using the common assessments as a means of teacher accountability, White offered it as a tool to spark conversations about best practices and drive decision-making about

professional development. “. . .it is our responsibility to have the professional development ready to go [during curriculum adoption], and so that’s where through the years, we’ve been working on the UbD (Understanding by Design), common assessment, and things like that,” Principal White said.

**PLCs.** The Greenbriar teachers indicated that many of the professional development initiatives are rolled out through professional learning communities (PLCs). These PLCs are small, building-based groups in which teachers are divided based on the subject matter and grade levels they teach. A few teachers also indicated that they met in PLC groups across the district to develop curriculum as well. Several teachers indicated they were uncertain as to whether the goals of the PLCs were supported and upheld by all of the staff who participated in them; many of them noted that they felt the administration, curriculum director, and educational coaches were disconnected from pedagogical best practices and the students whom they serve. Principal Jared White explained the role of the PLC in relation to the assessment process, noting:

The common assessment piece comes in when you say you take U.S. History, say eleventh grade, when all students are taking part of a sort of similar exam. Then they take than and we collect data from that, and we get the teachers together in a professional learning community dialoguing about how their students did versus how my students did . . . and then making decisions based on that.

When asked how frequently PLCs met to have such discussions, White acknowledged that it was “certainly not enough” with a few times a year. He added that the current focus of these PLCs has been to work on the new curriculum to ensure teachers can “work out the details.”

While the administration had reservations about the efficacy of the PLCs, some of the teachers found them beneficial. For example, Allison Shriver explained how she, as a

new teacher, found the time she spent working within the PLC useful in producing relevant course materials. She said:

So we came up with a rubric and we came up with like these are the papers that should be written at the senior level. And they were also doing that with the junior level. So, all of the English teachers in the district got together for that. It's something that we've worked on together, and it's nice because you have all three schools working together so it's nice if you have one student moving from one school to another they have the same experience.

Each participant's response to the school's implementation of the PLCs revealed the themes of assessment for standardization and assessment for systemization. The school's administration wants to ensure students are obtaining an equitable education across the many schools within the district. In doing so, they charge the PLCs with the task of collectively interpreting the standards and designing curriculum and assessments based on these interpretations.

**Character Education.** Greenbriar High School teachers also support a curriculum initiative to teach students about the "Six Pillars of Character:" trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Josephson Institute, 2014). These character traits are promoted through classroom activities and are displayed in the halls of the school. The school also honors students who showcase these character traits by featuring their pictures along the hallway near the main office. While the district upheld this specific character education initiative, several participants indicated they held a desire to teach depth and brevity not covered directly by the curriculum. Speaking about the content of her students' reading materials, Allison Shriver commented:

I think that's the best way for things to have meaning for them. It's not just, "Oh this is my English class and I am required to read this." So that they can make that connection and hopefully get something out of it, which, sometimes, is really difficult to do.

Shriver specifically chose selections from the newer textbook and more modern novels that she thought the students would relate to more easily, so they would more readily understand the story's relevance. In doing so, she explained, her educational goals for her students:

I would want them to be able to express themselves in a way that doesn't make them appear ignorant. To be able to be clear in their thinking, and being able to support their thinking. And just be better human beings, I guess. It's hard. High school can be tough, and to get caught up in that high school mentality.

On the one hand, Shriver is trying to teach her students how to be empathetic, compassionate, respectful young adults; meanwhile, on the other hand, she is striving to teach them a standardized education that requires them to be critical thinkers who can support a claim with textual evidence—21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning.

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning.** Greenbriar administrator, Jared White, indicated there was a strong push for teachers to teach “21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning” in which teachers focus on methods to enhance students' abilities to think critically, inspire creativity, collaborate with others, and communicate more effectively. White commented that under the best practices of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, teachers should no longer simply lecture to their students about content and measure students' abilities to understand the content at the end of the unit through a summative test. For example, Allison Shriver assigned her students an essay as a final unit assessment because she explained such forms of assessment go beyond multiple-choice exams, requiring students to analyze and synthesize learned content:

When I am looking for that knowledge base, I am focusing on that sense of it, not the ‘Hey, you did not put a comma there.’ You know, but if they draw lower case ‘I’s’ I do draw little sad faces with a tear. That’s my way of saying, ‘Don’t do that.’

While Shriver indicated on this written assessment, she did not weight students' writing abilities in regards to grammar and mechanics as heavily as she did her students' abilities to think critically and creatively.

**Focus.** Several of the Greenbriar teachers, the administrator, and the curriculum director referenced recent professional development based on Schmoker's (2011) book, *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*. This code revealed that many of Greenbriar's teachers thought about the ways they encouraged students to "read more, write more, and speak more." In his book, Schmoker stressed the need for educators to reconsider their curricula to determine the essentials of what students should be able to know and do. Only then, he explained, teachers may be able to "focus" enough to effectively teach. During interviews, several teachers interpreted the professional development to mean that students needed to read more inherently inspiring, relevant texts that students would be more likely interested in reflecting on the content through a writing or speaking exercise. In practice, I observed only one class that wrote reflectively and presented their ideas to the class (based on newspaper articles). The three other Greenbriar teachers presented students with a reading selection in which they either read aloud as a class or through silent, independent reading. The two teachers who read with students aloud probed them through a series of questioning; the teacher who had students read silently to themselves discussed a series of questions about the material during the last 10 minutes of class.

**Systematized.** Jared White, the Greenbriar principal, indicated there had been some change within the district with the advent of the curriculum director position, led by Kurt Brown: "It's been a lot more continuity and system-wide type of things, and keep on looking ahead. Strategic planning is a part of what we do." Prior to Brown's leadership,

White commented that the district had a former classroom teacher who became a curriculum coordinator and, because she had little experience in leadership, she did not have the authority among her colleagues to lead strategy in curriculum development.

**AdvancED.** White explained the role of the AdvancED in ensuring “systematic and systemic” strategic planning as a means of ensuring progress and measuring goals.

White commented that the district-wide goal that Greenbriar upholds is that of improving students’ literacy:

The [AdvancED] team comes back in three years; we want students to become better readers and writers, we want to be able to say, “Here was our goal; here is what we were working on five years later; here is how far we’ve come.

The work White’s staff and colleagues have done both in and out of the classroom, especially through the PLC model has contributed to a fresh vision of the professional development and school improvement process, he said:

I’ll give kudos to AdvancED to the progress they’ve made. They’ve moved it from a start and stop model—a one snapshot look at us—to a more strategic, ‘you’re going to keep working on this year after year after year.

### **Code Analysis for Emergent Themes**

To draw comparisons and contrasts among my North Dakota participants, I developed Table 4.3, documenting whether participants’ interviews and observations revealed the same codes, and subsequently, whether these codes suggested specific themes. Table 4.3 contains four general topic areas from which I triangulated data to better understand participants’ perceptions and observations. From these four areas, three themes emerged.



Table 4.3. Common Educational Themes Referenced among North Dakota Participants.

Participant's Name	Educational Standards	Common Assessments	Professional Development	AdvancED Evaluation
Principal White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teacher Smiley	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Teacher Smallbeck	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Teacher Shriver	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Teacher Jones	No	No	No	No
Curriculum Director Brown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

\* After observing me converse with another principal, this participant chose to forego the follow-up interview.

### Three Themes Reveal Three Assertions

After color-coding and combining my codes into categories, and analyzing parallels and contrasts among participants, three themes emerged: (a) content standards, (b), organizational structure, and (c) highly qualified educators. Several participants mentioned local, state, and national pressures to ensure educators adhere to specific content standards while upholding a certain degree of professionalism and expertise in the field of English-Language Arts. Several participants also referenced the administrator's attention to providing professional development to all staff to improve professionalism and organizational structures as a means of ensuring greater accountability of students' learning and teachers' abilities to educate. With these factors in mind, I used inductive reasoning to formulate three assertions that suggest the role of assessing students' learning within the school. The school assesses students' learning for (a) standardization, (b) systemization, and (c) accountability.

**Assertion 1: The School Assesses Students' Learning for Standardization.** As a part of the assessment process—whether mandated by the State of North Dakota under NCLB or required by the school as a common assessment—Greenbriar High School

educators assess students' learning to ensure students are acquiring a standardized curriculum based on the North Dakota Educational Standards for English Language Arts.

Principal, Dr. Jared White, indicated that the district recently overhauled its curriculum as teachers were expected to revisit the state standards in preparation for the shift toward the Common Core standards. He indicated:

We want to move away from page 1 to page 256 by the end of the year. We want to [long pause] we want to define what it is we want kids to know and to be able to do. And I also think that it's a lot of it is skimming across the surface with curriculum and we want to dig deep once in a while and make sure that their learning is meaningful, and so then when you do that you want to assess.

One teacher who said he did not approach the class from (in the words of Jared White) "page 1 to page 256 by the end of the year" was Gene Smiley, English teacher and department chair. Prior to class, Smiley informed me that his students had been studying Homer's *The Odyssey*. During my observation of his class, through a rapid-fire series of questions and answers, Smiley assessed students' abilities to recall the key elements of the plot and characters as a review of the previous day's work. In so doing, he also attempted to relate the text to students' lives, providing a sense of relevancy or context as a purpose for reading. During my follow-up interview with Smiley, I asked him to explain his educational objective for the students in reading *The Odyssey*. He responded:

I think one, just to understand its historical importance. The funny thing is that one of the students came back, and he was watching *Swamp People* this weekend, and one of the reruns made a reference that there was a one-eyed alligator. . . . And they called it 'The Cyclops.' And he got that.

Smiley explained that a basic understanding of concepts, as defined by state standards, include textual analysis and reflection, a greater concern for him is an overall awareness of cultural literacy. While the current North Dakota State Standards do not explicitly

require students to make personal connections with texts, Gene Smiley believes such a connection enables students to connect with the text to understand its deeper significance. He also explained that his informal assessments of students' learning within the classroom—such as rapid-fire questioning as a means of checking for understanding—help him to create an environment in which he is able to provide greater attention to students' needs. If students do not understand the required content or a specific concept delineated by the educational standards, then he may re-teach the material to those specific students.

Valerie Smallbeck is a teacher who has taught for 11 years (five within this district and six in a southern state). She also designed her English III-IV class, which is specifically modified for high school juniors and seniors who are on individual educational plans for learning disabilities, to assess students on the concepts she felt they needed most by creating relevant connections for students. During the class I observed, Smallbeck and her co-teacher Deidra Roberts brought in the local newspaper and had the students choose articles to analyze and then present their analysis to the class.

*10:29 a.m.* A student walks to the front of the room, newspaper in hand, and briefly explains, "It was a story about a cruise ship that capsized."

Co-teacher Deidra Roberts asks a question, probing him for more information, "So how could we guess that these people died?"

Valerie Smallbeck nods in agreement.

"They drowned," the student responds, shifting his weight back and forth between his legs.

"So are they caught inside the ship?" Smallbeck asks.

"Yeah, I guess."

“Where did this event take place?” Roberts asks. The student attempts to read the location, but he is unable to pronounce the foreign location. This student is dismissed and the next student is encouraged to go to the front of the room to present.

“Can I pass?” He asks.

“Do you want to pass this class?” Smallbeck responds.

“Yeah,” he mumbles as he walks reluctantly to the front of the room.

When asked to explain her objective in this assignment and what she was assessing,

Valerie Smallbeck responded:

Well, the school read *Focus* by Schmoker, who said that ‘you need to go back to read, write, speak.’ Read, write, speak. So that introduced a lot more nonfiction into it, and so that is what we were asking of them. So, we’re reading more nonfiction. Things that are out of their comfort zone, but really that is a life skill that we would like them to leave here with. Having them do a research paper on a dead poet or something—and that’s how they see it in their head—doesn’t benefit their future. So we did research papers on career choices.

Though Smallbeck teaches a modified class to students who have learning disabilities or emotional/behavioral concerns, her overall objective is similar to that of the other teachers I observed in that she attempts to create a relevant application and connection to the curriculum for her students. While she acknowledged that her students may be unable to “know and do” the concepts and skills expected of the traditional-track student, her goal is to ensure they meet the essential, standard curricula, based on her understanding of Schmoker’s (2011) principles.

Curriculum Director Kurt Brown indicated it is essential for educators to implement a standardized curriculum due to the specific assessments that are required both locally and state-wide. Greenbriar High School educators are assessing students’ learning both formatively and summatively as a part of a process to ensure they are meeting the requirement for a standardized curriculum. Participants such as teachers

Gene Smiley and Valerie Smallbeck explained, this differentiated curriculum not only incorporates the North Dakota Curriculum Standards, but also includes school-wide initiatives such as character education and an attention to 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills.

**Assertion 2: The School Assesses Students' Learning for Systemization.**

Greenbriar High School assesses students' learning to create systemization among educators. This school-wide system is an approach to the assessment process in which all educators have access to appropriate course materials to support students' learning on a standardized curriculum. Educators work collaboratively, to develop this system in which they may effectively assess students through internal, teacher-generated exams, collaboratively developed common assessments, as well as externally generated exams such as the NDSA or NWEA MAP.

While many of the teachers and the administrators stressed the importance of students learning a curriculum in which they could develop a connection, they also brought forward concerns over fair and equitable access to the curriculum. For example, Allison Shriver, a first-year teacher who had previous experience within the district as a tutor, explained her frustrations in acquiring the necessary number of textbooks for her students at the beginning of the school year. I noticed that during the particular class I observed she was borrowing textbooks from a neighboring teacher. When I asked her about her ability to acquire texts, she explained:

So I push my cart from class to class, and at the beginning of the year, I was trying to put together the books, and some teachers use the older editions, and other teachers have the newer editions. So I was trying to figure out what books I had, and I had nine copies of a classroom set. . . . So it turns out there were books in the book closet, but they were all in boxes so I did not see them. So I did not know if that was miscommunication when I was trying to get things sorted out. It just kind of went over their heads or whatever, but the book I wanted to use was the other one, so I just went next door and borrowed books from the other teacher.

While Shriver's struggles to provide textbooks for her students posed a few problems, she was able to find enough textbooks for a classroom set. However, she noted that she did use the neighboring teacher's books when she wanted to assign a story from the newer textbooks, but that she did not have enough textbooks for all of her classes—she only had enough for a classroom set.

Shriver was not the only teacher who had concerns regarding equitable access to materials. For example, Gene Smiley stressed that the district was moving to requiring students to read specific texts within each quarter of the academic year as a part of a common assessment process. He clarified how this would pose potential problems for his department as there simply weren't enough books to go around:

What they want to do is because we do have students that transfer between schools, they are thinking of making all sophomores read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the first nine weeks. The second nine weeks you have to do *Julius Caesar* or whatever, which is fine, but part of it is just the resources. . . . I mean, I know when I taught in another school district, we had one class set. So if three classes wanted to use it, you could not. You had to space things out, even within your own teaching schedule. So here, Susan [another teacher I observed] made up the schedule, and I think there are 11 sophomore classes. And if there are 25 in a class, then that's 300 copies right there. And if our other campus is going to do it too—we share a few of the books back and forth—that's 600 copies.

While Smiley conceded that some of these literary works could be found in their classroom textbooks, he indicated that the district is still struggling to define the essential texts as they tie to the North Dakota state standards. Principal Jared White explained some of the school district's reasoning behind developing a common assessment as based on these standards as it pertained to the departmental professional learning communities:

And then they can say, how did you teach it, and how did you teach it? And that then being about some of those similar resources that could help one teacher or another—it's just having those dialogues, so that where the assessment piece comes in for me. It melds into a professional learning community and everybody being open to being something a little bit better, something a little bit different, how kids learn all those things get worked in there.

White's impressions of the overall objective may be with an overall supportive intent; however, when I asked Smiley whether his district (teachers who work together in professional learning communities with the guidance of the curriculum director) has identified the key texts that every student should read and on which each should be assessed through a "common assessment," he replied:

Well, we're working on it. We haven't come up with anything really specific yet. We're trying to (pauses, speaks more slowly) determine what is actually important. For example, some of the freshman teachers really want to make sure that *Great Expectations* is high priority. One of the things that the district has asked for is something that we ourselves as a district feel is important—is that I myself do not really like *Great Expectations*, but for those of us who are saying, 'You know, we need to have our common assessment be based on *Great Expectations*,' and others are like, 'No, I do not even teach *Great Expectations*.' I think we could pick something that is more user friendly for the kids as well as for the teachers.

Though Smiley references the concept of "user friendly," I must note that among the four teachers I observed, only one taught directly from the local newspaper. The other three teachers were teaching "classic texts," including authors such as Tennyson and Homer. Interestingly enough, it was the youngest teacher—and the newest to the profession—that chose a more modern text that that from which she thought her students could identify.

Teacher Allison Shriver noted:

Like with *Teenage Wasteland* . . . It was really interesting the things they thought of with them being teenagers and uhm, they're struggling. Or like, you know, over-protective parents, or like the things they picked up on. Say like Daisy is the mom and Cal is the tutor, and he's kind of ah a crazy hippie, you know, and maybe should be more involved because I think that they could maybe relate to it a little more.

With Shriver's response, I am again recalling other teacher's indications—such as that of teachers Gene Smiley and Valerie Smallbeck—of the importance of students' connections to a text. And, it is these connections, as Smiley indicates, that teachers cannot accurately assess through a common assessment or some other standardized test.

During my interview with Dr. Kurt Brown, curriculum director, I pressed him on the teachers' perceived concerns regarding the need for common assessments based on set texts, rather than on a set of skills established through the statewide Common Core curriculum. He explained the school's challenges:

So here we are, we've spent a lot of time putting together the Response to Intervention professional development framework in place so that the learners are the variable and that the time and place are the constant. We haven't made tremendous progress with our middle and high schools, but we have made some progress with some of our elementary schools. But here's what's happening at middle and high school. If you do not have PLCs formalized, you can't do RTI effectively. So here's what our secondary folks are doing. They're leap-frogging over "what should our students know and be able to do" to creating an intervention when kids fail when they haven't even agreed upon what they should know and be able to do. This is the mess.

Brown further clarified the district's challenges in establishing school-wide systemization. Many of the teachers indicated there was a desire to create common assessments, but they argued over the content required for the assessment, fixating on the equitability of curriculum resources, rather than on the ability to measure students' skills.

Brown rationalized:

In order to move our agenda forward, we just need our [full-time employees] to keep pushing forward. We do have principals at very different skill levels, at very different levels of the curriculum and standards. And what the research says about grading—we just can't move fast enough.

As a means of establishing a culture for systemization in which educators were more comfortable working together toward a common goal of improving instruction and assessments, Brown developed a school improvement team. This team was comprised of "instructional coaches" within the school district's smaller elementary schools that were identified as not achieving AYP and in need of program improvement. He explained:

So we allocated 50% of their time at that school for one school year. . . And it went off the program improvement list. It went from the second from the bottom that year in achievement to the top. In one calendar year, on the state assessment.



With the district-wide success, Brown created a team for the middle and high schools based on the model he had used for the elementary program:

Essentially, we have one person [Christina James] who is the coach for 6-12. So really what has happened to our coaches is they have become curriculum coordinators in helping set the wide margins in what everyone is doing. Narrowing those margins. Getting everything lined up and outlined, and then working with that committee and department to enhance teaching improvements. And not allowing people the option to teach whatever they want to teach. We've had some really uncomfortable conversations with some of our teachers, so when you—when you talk about curriculum, a lot of our teachers think that a curriculum is something you purchase through Scott Foresman.

While conducting an analysis of my classroom observations, I noted that three of the four teachers did use textbooks to teach the standards. Their methods of assessing students' learning, meanwhile, also were similar: most teachers used frequent short answer responses that directly related to an assigned text with students' personalized reflections. Reconsider Gene Smiley's class in which students answered a series of rapid-fire questions to determine whether students could recall what they previously discussed, and whether his students were able to make a relevant connection to the story's plot by creating a modern connection. During my follow-up interview with Smiley, I asked him why he chose to tell his students a story about how his mother sent his father (who was stationed overseas) Smiley's belly-button scab. He responded, "To show that even though this was written several thousand years ago, it still has some bearing and you can still relate to it and understand it."

I followed up his response with a more probing question, "Do you think that by relaying your own personal stories, or perhaps, by having them share their own, do you think that helps them remember the content better?" to which Smiley responded:

I think so. And they make that connection. Whether it is text-to-text or text-to-self, they start to understand, and go, 'Oh.' Like the *Scarlet Ibis* which is in our freshman textbook. When they go, 'I've been picked on before,' or 'I haven't

liked this person because of how they walked,' that's really pretty cool. Just making those connections so that they have a touchstone. Something that they can relate to.

Smiley employs an existentialist approach to the classroom setting, stressing the importance of aiding students in their identification with the text as a means to improve understanding and retention of literary concepts and provide a greater relevancy.

Gene Smiley was not the only teacher that attempted to assess students based on their ability to connect with the texts. For example, Valerie Smallbeck spoke of her students in her modified class:

I hope that they will read the paper and absorb part of it. And then having to process what to share of it, I am hoping that they are able to share the most important things.

*KGJ:* So when they were doing that assignment, how did you know that they had gained what you'd intended for them to gain?

*Valerie Smallbeck:* (long pause) I think that both of us tried to ask questions that we could see if we could draw that out of them. We had read all four articles, and so we knew what the most important points were, and so we kept asking questions to see if we could draw it out of them. So we were waiting for that verbal response.

While I did observe Valerie Smallbeck and her co-teacher Deidra Roberts posing guiding questions to students about the texts they read and analyzed to gauge their overall understanding of the text and the individual connections to each article, I could not help but question whether they were guiding them to the correct answers—whether their assessment of students' true abilities was accurate. For example, I witnessed the following exchange:

*10:33 a.m.* Another student walks to the front of the room. He explains his topic is about "a guy who was being charged with [unintelligible] during the Crystal Sugar lockouts. The student's critical reflection on the news story is lacking in that he fails to

explain the story's context and impact. The two teachers fill in the missing information. The student comments briefly to explain that 100 people are out of a job.

“So what was the most interesting thing?” Deidra Roberts asks.

“They have been out of work for nine months,” the student responds.

“Why did you choose it?”

“My dad is in the union at Simplot.”

“Another personal attachment,” Valerie Smallbeck clarifies.

“Nice job,” Deidra Roberts says. I think to myself, “*Really?*”

Perhaps my impressions of this excerpt of my observation are inaccurate—or perhaps my expectations of students' performance is more rigorous, but a simple connection to the text (“my father is in the union”) and a basic regurgitation of the newspaper article hardly demonstrates a working knowledge of the text—emphasized by the fact that the teachers had to walk this student through the text to ensure the rest of the class was able to understand his presentation.

Though I have experience working with students who require modified assessments as based on individual learning plans that stem from measured academic deficiencies due to learning disabilities, I do find the teachers' need to explain the text for the student as undermining the assessment process as Valerie Smallbeck described in her initial objectives. However, not knowing this specific student's educational plan, I am unable to decipher whether both Smallbeck and Roberts were using differentiation—meeting students where they are in their learning abilities and designing curriculum, and assessing curriculum based on these needs—in their approach.

As Curriculum Director Kurt Brown explained, creating a culture of systemization within a school is difficult. Though one might believe that the individual

student is at the heart of the business of education, for many the reality is school accountability—in an imbalanced system, district accountability often navigates curriculum, assessment and the entire process of constructing systemization (Stiggins, 2010). For example, my interview with Principal Jared White revealed the following exchange that emphasized the importance of the accreditation process in relation to establishing school-wide systemization:

*KGJ:* You mentioned that literacy became the focus during your AdvancED accreditation process. How much of what you choose to do is based on your need for accreditation? [*Wow, that is a loaded question!*]

*Jared White:* [loooong pause] It's kind of the focus of the district, it's the focus of our school, and everything, and hopefully it becomes part of our vision and our focus. I'll speak for [the school] now, but it is a district thing and that everyone is striving toward literacy, and so the things we do, we tend to do in the name of literacy. We want students to become better readers and writers, but also the NCA [*now called AdvancED*] team comes back in three years, we want to be able to say, here was our goal, here was what we were working on five years later, here's how far we've come, here's what we've done in the meantime.

While Principal White explained the importance of a standardized education in which students learn an essential core knowledge base, he also stressed the importance of school district accountability that is based on the joint efforts of teachers, curriculum directors, administrators to create comprehensive and relevant assessments. For example, White noted his district's goal to improve students' literacy skills, as a means to improve the academic yearly progress scores (as a part of No Child Left Behind). Because his district made literacy a primary goal, AdvancED would use this goal as a benchmark by which to hold the district accountable. Individual teacher's curriculum and assessments do contribute to this overall process; however, White indicated that the district-wide common assessment and Northwestern Education Association Measures of Academic Progress, as well as the North Dakota State Assessment and the ACT would be

standardized assessments by which the AdvancED accreditation team could estimate the district's growth.

While the district may value these forms of assessment as they provide a snapshot of students' abilities, many of the teachers acknowledged they scheduled only a few class periods to prepare students specifically for these tests. For example, teacher Allison Shriver described her ACT review:

We took a couple of days and did like a group review. I printed off the ACT practice and you know I just gave it and was like 'All right, I'm just going to time it and just imagine, how do you feel about it?' Because a lot of those things are common knowledge, and just so that they were prepared to deal with that anxiety. Some had questions like, 'When do you use dashes instead of commas?' and so then we could talk about it. Same thing with the reading. They said that the reading was easier. And then the same thing with the writing too, we discuss the types of levels of writing.

Though Shriver said that she only took but a few class periods to review the format and basic expectations of the ACT, she felt that her students were more prepared than if they hadn't had the experience. However, she indicated that her own assessments do provide a clear picture of what her students are able to do:

I think it's one of those things that you have to look at back where they were at the beginning and if you can gauge that improvement. They can put their ideas down in a complete sentence. Or, you know, they are making sense. Or if, I guess, they sound even more knowledgeable. It's one of those things that you may not see improvement right away, but on the larger scale, I would say especially a few students who stand out in mind that I've seen a lot of improvement.

Shriver's experiences were similar to that of the other teachers I interviewed and observed. Gene Smiley indicated that by the end of the year, he felt that he knew each of his students so well that he could predict how they would perform on their assessments, and he knew exactly what he would need to do to help each of his students prepare for those district wide assessments on a differentiated basis.

To put it another way, while every teacher I observed and interviewed explained that he or she assessed students on a daily basis and could regularly assess students on a formative and summative basis, their individual course grades were not the terms of measurement that they believed the district deemed as valid for accountability purposes. What was not expressly stated in words, but was intimated through inference was that teachers felt the district did not trust their ability to equitably assign valid grades to students' work. When I pressed this issue by asking Gene Smiley whether individual teachers had professional development on norm-referenced grading so as to create a sense of an "even playing field" in which all teachers had similar expectations in assigning letter grades to students work (in this case, he references essays), he responded:

We did it many years ago and it did not work very well (pauses and slows down in speaking) because some teachers were focused on just the grammar and the sentence structure. Other teachers would grade it on the creativity and the depth of the knowledge. But this last year, we did a norm referencing and I think we were pretty much on the same page. I think last spring and then this fall, and that I think went much better because I think that the rubric we created was much better.

Smiley's experiences with norm-referenced grading provided perspective on the district's approach toward the assessment process. To create equity, validity and a sense of balance in the assessment process, while maintaining accountability measures, the district created an imbalance by placing an emphasis on district-wide common assessments and national standardized tests.

However, the district's Curriculum Director Kurt Brown explained the district's perspective on assessments and accountability differently. He noted:

My position was created, really, in response to our district being put on program improvement. So essentially, Kristin, I have all the accountability for student achievement, but I have no authority within the classroom, given that I am in line essentially with the principal. There are some organizational structure things, from my perspective, need to be reviewed. . . . Our two high schools 76<sup>th</sup> from

the bottom in performance on literacy and math in comparison with 400 other school districts. Joe Public doesn't seem to know about that, or care [pauses] because we continue to be one of the 100 best little communities to live in the country. And by and large our schools are safe. By and large our teachers are nice, but I'm not going to say our instruction has been poor, but the instructional target has been way off.

During my interview with Brown, he intimated the importance of incorporating students' needs and discussing students' concerns as an integral part of the educational assessment process:

Another piece I'll share with you is that I meet with a committee that I chair. It meets once a month, and it's called our educational enhancement team, and it was part of our organizational structure when I started. Because as a 29-year-old first year principal, I realized quickly that students did not have a voice in what happened to them, or for them. So I started having focus group conversations, and it did not matter if it was kindergarten, sixth grade, or eighth grade, you can frame those questions and get pretty common themes established in a school. So I meet with this group once a month and it includes five high school students, along with a couple of teachers, community members, parents, and we have a UND liaison as well.

Intrigued by Brown's formation of a focus group to better understand the school's needs from students' perspectives, I asked him how frequently administrators observed the interaction among teachers and students within the classroom. He responded:

You know, the high school principal's role is so different. It's so different that instruction is not close at all to what they do. However, with the Marzano framework, they are going to be required to and there will be some timing and evidence, that I will be able to check the system. Whether I will be given the authority to do any of that—

*KGJ:* That leads me to the question though, that if you have instructional coaches coming in to help guide and assist, with say the challenges of a very young teacher who is full of life and excited and has a lot of great ideas that maybe haven't been tried and needs to prove him/herself and a more well-seasoned teacher who is used to teaching the same way and has for years. The instructional coach has the ability to go in and guide and assist them in their instruction, and the principal is going in to evaluate—are those two people going to get together so the instructional coach can help the principal in his or her job?

*Kurt Brown:* [long pause] We've drawn a very bright line for our instructional coaches and we agreed as a team that when you come out of a classroom, you won't immediately meet with a principal because it may look like you are

betraying us. And the whole foundational approach to coaching is based on trust. So I have made it very clear to principals, do not expect a coach to leak any information to you unless there is some extenuating circumstance.

In light of Brown's comments regarding his team of instructional coaches and their approach to observing and assisting teachers within the classroom also explained, perhaps, why Susan Jones chose to forego the interview, after she observed me having a brief conversation with her principal.

In sum, based on the school's need to provide equitable access to course materials and texts in support of a standardized curriculum, Greenbriar High School educators assess students' learning to develop school-wide systemization.

**Assertion 3: The School Assesses Students' Learning for Accountability.**

Upon initial consideration, the answer to the question, "Why are school systems assessing students' learning?" may seem simplistic: to measure students' abilities. However, my research unearthed a three-pronged approach that not only includes measuring students' performance, but assessments also are used to measure teachers' abilities and the district's abilities to promote growth.

During my interview with the Curriculum Director Dr. Kurt Brown, we discussed the purpose for student assessments based on content standards referenced by my observations and interviews with the teachers and principal, noting that the standards drive curriculum because they are the legal, agreed upon understanding of what teachers should be teaching. Brown further explained the need for assessing students' learning:

Nobody has been held accountable. We still have, by and large, this notion of independent contracting in various classrooms. And it really was not until the advent of our department in our 09-10 year that we started to look at what needed to be systematized. There were a hundred things that needed to be systematized and everything was a priority. What do we pick first? The first thing that we picked as a committee was a [pauses] need for instructional coaches. The transformation of the classroom is going to happen through the teacher. It isn't



going to happen through the curriculum. Or a vendor that we purchase curriculum materials through.

Upon reflection on my classroom observations and conversations with educators, Brown's frustration reverberated as I found that teachers often frequently used canonical texts (such as *The Odyssey*) that are featured within their textbooks. When I clarified the district's goal to improve the way teachers assess students' learning (through an examination of standards, rather than specific texts) with Principal Jared White, I asked him whether the accreditation process through AdvancED—with its focus on a commitment to continuous improvement—shaped the assessment process. He replied:

Our district hasn't been real great at that in the past. With Dr. Brown's position, it's been a lot more continuity and system-wide type of things, and keep on looking ahead. Strategic planning is a part of what we do.

He noted that he had expressly promoted professional development opportunities for his staff that would allow them to explore concepts such as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, Understanding by Design, and working within professional learning communities to develop common assessments.

However, he stressed the importance of using assessments as a means of establishing a clear picture of what and how students were learning within the district. Part of the assessment process, he explained, was to measure an adherence to the standards:

So we look at our state standards and I know that the teacher curriculum institute—TCI—they have been very good about looking at our state standards and making sure that all of our standards are addressed. So that's that piece, and then as soon as we have our curriculum set, then we are going to go back to curriculum mapping. We have an online curriculum mapping [pauses] that we are going to keep working on and define what we want students to be able to know, what we want students to be able to do, essential questions, and eventually lead to the common assessments down the line.

As a part of the commitment to continuous improvement as an AdvancED value upheld by the district, Principal White noted, “You’re always looking for something better. Just making sure that students know what we want them to know.” While White explained that students’ performance did not factor into teachers’ evaluations, he did want his educators to understand the importance of improving students’ scores and analyzing the data to make curriculum improvements. “Our message,” he said, “was that we are not going to do the same things that we have been doing—continue to do worksheet packets, lecture, notes, and then, uhm, a summative test at the end.”

Because formative assessments are designed to effectively measure what students know prior to their coursework and summative assessments are designed to measure what students have learned after their instruction, White explained that the lone traditional summative testing (such as the North Dakota State Assessment, for example) does not accurately capture a sense of what students have learned. This struggle to balance why we are assessing—the objective goal—must help teachers and the district-wide professional learning communities establish the best methods for assessment, White explained.

Because I found that each of these teachers and the principal felt that each student’s interest in and identification with the course materials was paramount in individual success, I was surprised that so many of them identified that the curriculum itself (the “what” of assessment) drove their assessment process. While each of them stressed the importance of differentiation and establishing a curriculum that addresses the whole child in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to some degree, the concept of “for whom” is lost on the students. Instead, as Principal Jared White indicated:

You have teachers who have been teaching twenty or more years, and this is the way they're going to do it, and they're going to keep on doing it, and you just kinda keep working away, and uh, expect a little bit different, and expect some changes.

While White acknowledged that there were members of his staff who needed to hone their abilities to assess students based on a differentiated model, he did say that he is making direct strides by offering more opportunities for professional development, so that his teachers do not lose sight for whom they are assessing. He noted:

I think the whole point is to have multiple ways for students to learn. Multiple ways to assess student learning. I think one of the buzz words we're using right now is—as far as literacy goes now—‘read more, write more, discuss more.’ And defining how that all looks. I think it's a paradigm shift.

One of these teachers is Valerie Smallbeck, who feels as though she has no choice but to differentiate her classroom—that her students' lack of ability on the standardized curriculum warranted an individualized approach to assessments. She explained this concept through the following exchange:

*KGJ:* You had some students in here, who you'd indicated that they wouldn't pass class if they weren't here. So tell me a little bit about that process and how you handle that coming in.

*Valerie Smallbeck:* I handle that when the new student is coming in, and so last year when we were setting up the modifieds, the case managers would say, ‘Can you pleeeeeeaaasse take them? They're not going to pass English I.’ And so we took them, and we had sixteen. And that is a lot in a modified class. It defeats the purpose. The problem is you end up with the “can'ts” and the ‘won'ts.’ Those ‘won'ts’ are going to be a ‘won't’ in just about any classroom. Yes, we were able to pull things out of some of them, but not all of them. One kid failed, and he was one of the ‘won'ts.’ . . . So we worked with a case manager, so that the counselor wouldn't just put them in our class. Our dream would be a meeting so that we could all see with like minds. So it's improved. My junior English is 10 this year, my senior English is nine. One student just got back from a seven month treatment place. I think he got put in here just to guarantee that he gets through. Is he modified? No. In fact, he actually loses patience with the bouncy, hyperactivity of the others. But he just wants to graduate. We're four weeks away.

As Smallbeck explained, she differentiated her class for the particular students who need modifications. For example, she explained how she reviewed the individual learning plans of the “can’ts”—students who struggled to learn due to a variety of learning disabilities—and made modifications to her lessons and assessments accordingly. Meanwhile, the students who are capable of doing the work, but choose not to (the “won’ts”) who are placed in her class with the hope that they graduate do not receive modified curricula or assessments; however, she acknowledged that she worked with each individually to best ensure that he or she passes her class.

As Curriculum Director Kurt Brown and Principal Jared White explained, educators at Greenbriar High School assess students’ learning as a part of a three-pronged approach. Not only do educators assess to measure students’ competency on key concepts in preparation for college and career readiness, but the school promotes common assessments and external evaluations to ensure educators are adequately providing students with a standardized education and are committed to continuous improvement as a part of the school-wide growth initiative.

Comparatively, “Whitmoor College” in Surrey, England also maintains a school-wide vision in which educators promote continuous improvement, in which the school implements external assessments of students’ learning to evaluate student, teacher, and school-wide achievement. However, Whitmoor College’s implementation and emphasis of such assessment processes is different than that of Greenbriar High School in North Dakota, which I will explain further in the next section.

### **Surrey, England Results**

The grounds of “Whitmoor College” lie within an established neighborhood with tree-lined streets and rustic, brick homes. This English school has a long-standing

tradition of serving students of Surrey, who make up roughly similar demographics to that of the school in North Dakota: primarily Caucasian and a middle-level socioeconomic status. The school system employs roughly 200 faculty and staff, who serve roughly 1,950 students, of which there are more than 300 students in each age group and nearly 450 are in the sixth form. According to the school's website, Whitmoor College has received numerous educational awards for its innovations and Ofsted reviewers have held this school in high regard, noting its "openness and self-critical approach."

According to its prospectus, the school upholds a mission to "promote excellence, personal achievement and the realization of each student's potential, irrespective of gender, race or cultural background." In so doing, school officials aim to provide intellectually stimulating experiences that build on the "academic foundations required for his or her future life," through implementation of a "broad, balanced and relevant curriculum" that is differentiated for students' varied needs and abilities, while promoting "self-confidence" and "independent learning." The school emphasizes a need to "promote a culture of continuous improvement" among stakeholders as well as a safe and comfortable working environment for all staff.

Under nationwide reform efforts, the school earned "Academy status" in July 2011 and established a partnership with a struggling local school system as a part of a greater strategic plan to improve both schools. The school received Specialist status for the Visual Arts in 2001 and received a second Specialist status in Modern Foreign Languages in 2008. In 2006, Ofsted gave the school an "Outstanding" grade. Since 2007, the school has been a "High Performing Specialist" school and according to its prospectus, it continues to meet the criteria of these "specialisms."

Also in 2001, the school became a nationally recognized Training School. Since September 2011, it has been named as one of the first 100 Teaching Schools in England. According to the school’s prospectus (and comparable to the school in North Dakota), “The emphasis on continuing professional development for teachers and support staff places the school at the forefront of educational theory and practice.”

For this study I observed and interviewed four teachers, two administrators, and one curriculum director, and one data specialist in a school system in Surrey, England in June 2012. Because I was unfamiliar with the cultural nuances of a system in a country of which I am not a native and was challenged to comprehend educational policy and practices during my 10 days in England, I also spoke casually with eight other school officials (including an observation of a leadership team meeting) and six students to better understand the school’s culture, climate, and other factors (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4. Surrey, England Participants.

Participant’s Name	Title	Grade Level	Classroom Demographics	Interview or Observation
Darin LaMoine	Executive Head of School	NA	NA	Interview
Yvonne Stoller	Head of School	NA	NA	Interview
Jackson Hughes	ELA Teacher	Y10	General	Both
Sharon Duchess	Special Ed. Teacher	Varied	Special Needs	Interview
Amy O’Shane	ELA Teacher	Y11	General	Both
Jim Ohman	Performing Arts Head Teacher	A-Level	General	Both
Thomas Miller	Curriculum Director	NA	NA	Interview
Charles Rice	Data Coordinator	NA	NA	Interview

### **Moving from Codes to Assertions**

Similar to my analysis of data collected in North Dakota, to obtain a general sense of my coded data, I read through my transcripts several times to explore connections in codes and reflect on the broader meaning of each participant’s observations and

interviews (Creswell, 2011). I noted similarities and differences in codes among my Surrey participants by spreading out my work and grouping similarities into color-coded categories (represented in Table 4.5) (I later compared these to my North Dakota participants, found in Table 4.2). When comparing the frequency of codes and subsequent categories and themes, I also compared the data generated through interviews and observations of each participant. Table 4.6 demonstrates four sample codes that are represented through data obtained by each participant. For example, the codes “accountability,” “performance management,” and “Ofsted” I placed within the same color-coded category because the content in which each of these codes emerged was similar in nature. These categories then revealed the theme of a perceived need for professionalism among all educators. Drawing from these themes, I suggest assertions that the school assesses students’ learning for 1) standardization, 2) systemization, and 3) accountability.

Table 4.5. Surrey, England Codes; Categories; Themes; and Assertions.

Surrey Codes	Surrey Categories	Surrey Themes	Surrey Assertions
Curriculum	Curriculum	Content Standards	The school assesses students’ learning for standardization.
Pastoral Accountability Formative-Summative Differentiation	Pastoral		
System Performance Management School Development Plan Ofsted	System  School Development Plan Formative-Summative	Organizational Structure	The school assesses students’ learning as a part of its systemization.
	Accountability  Professional Development Performance Management Ofsted	Professionalism	The school assesses students’ learning for accountability.

Table 4.6. Common Educational Themes Referenced among Surrey Participants.

Participant's Name	National Curriculum	School Improvement	Professional Development	Ofsted Evaluation
Executive Head of School LaMoine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Head of School Stoller	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ELA Teacher Hughes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Special Ed. Teacher Duchess	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ELA Teacher O'Shane	Yes	No	No	Yes
Performing Arts Head Teacher Ohman	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Curriculum Director Miller	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data Coordinator Rice	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

### Sample Codes Explained

**Accountability.** Due to the pressure placed on the school by external stakeholders such as Ofsted for school-wide accountability to educate students on the National Curriculum, many of the participants indicated they take part in regular professional development as part of a greater school-wide vision for students' improvement. In the words of Head of School Yvonne Stoller:

So because of the accredited provider that we have here to train teachers, and because we were a training school, and now a teaching school where we open our doors and share our materials and supports with other schools as well, we are very lucky. We have a large number of staff who work together to develop personnel.

A perceived need for professional development as a means of preparing educators for the scrutinizing lens of the public by means of the published league tables became an occurring theme, which led to my assertions on why the school assesses students' learning. While evidence suggests students themselves hold themselves accountable for their learning. Data Coordinator Charles Rice explained:

Teachers once did not tell students where they were going. Now we are more results driven and so students take exams until they get the grades that they want. Students know what they want to do and that is to study a specific subject. As



soon as they are beginning to study with that focus in mind, then they begin to prepare for it. They become very, very driven.

Students use teachers' feedback to ascertain their progress in attaining course content, in preparation for external exams such as the GCSE, Rice explained. Hence, not only do educators assess students' learning for school and teacher accountability, but also for students' accountability to educational standards as well. As we'll see with the next code, "differentiation," there is a need for students and teachers to use the data obtained from formative assessments collaboratively, to promote achievement.

**Differentiation.** Many of the participants described teaching styles that incorporate assessment data to drive decision-making within their classrooms, especially in regards to differentiation, including meeting students at their academic ability and helping them to improve through targeted instruction and interventions. However, Year 10 ELA teacher Jackson Hughes explained that while teachers are able to make these concessions, the GCSE is not as forgiving:

So [the question] would be what are some of the thoughts and feelings the writer has about—as he expresses them. That would be more analytical. Now on that section, technical accuracy is not judged. On the writing section it is judged. So for that student that we are talking about she would be penalized for her special educational need, and it limits her in that capacity. It doesn't in the reading capacity. Yes, she is exam accommodated to some extent, but not in every area.

Hughes explained that this particular student who has dyslexia may have to work harder than her classmates to succeed on the same curriculum expectations—she may be capable of doing the work, but in the given testing format, she may falter in her abilities.

**Curriculum.** Nearly all participants referenced Whitmoor College's attention to providing students an education that meets the expectations outlined by the National Curriculum. Some participants explained that there also is a push to go beyond these expectations (similar to Greenbriar High School). For example, Data Coordinator

Charles Rice commented that because Whitmoor College's students generally have supportive, affluent parents, they often expose students to new experiences. However, he explained that the school also ensures students receive curricula that afford unique opportunities and experiences that will challenge students while preparing them for higher education and the workforce:

We can provide opportunities to some who do not have it, and so we can ensure that students do not miss out—to pay for resources, and theater trips and things. . . . Photography and graphic design are strong, fine arts is struggling as A level courses. Foundation courses are one year at a university—it gives them a certain standard if they choose to go into that field. [Whitmoor College] offers quite a bit more than other schools, and so this isn't much of a problem for them, but because students are realizing that science and math are giving them more opportunities in life.

Rice also explained that Surrey, England has a community-based university that offers stronger science and technology courses, and as a result, students are less likely to pursue a higher education in liberal arts. Though Rice held this perception, during data analysis, I reflected on the number of students I observed within each classroom setting and the content each English Language Arts teacher discussed within these settings. One course taught by Head Teacher Jim Ohman specifically focused on drama—a liberal art. The ELA class taught by Amy O'Shane also discussed feminist literary theory as evidenced by a play written by Tennessee Williams—another example of a liberal arts focus. My discussion with ELA teacher Jackson Hughes on the GCSE clarified that while many students may not eventually opt to take up liberal arts as professionals, the National Curriculum requires the study of liberal arts concepts, as referenced by the sample standards I provided in Chapter I.

**School development plan.** Many of the participants explained how the assessment process was a component of a school-wide development plan. Head of

School Yvonne Stoller explained, “Everyone has a whole vision for their school—everyone receives a copy of the plan and it is explained to everyone then they prepare for the performance management cycle.” School development included individualized, targeted professional development as well as specific expectations for evaluation for all educators and other employees. For example, Curriculum Director Thomas Miller, described how he oversaw the school development through the curriculum lens:

I am responsible for input/output, standards of curriculum, what is taught and how much . . . when we assess, and retention of students. If results aren’t good enough we come under pressure.

Miller explained the annual Ofsted League tables provide an analysis for all of the results that are used to make curriculum and instructional decisions. “If there are significant weaknesses, then we are expected to account for that,” Miller noted.

Stoller explained, “Last year was effective assessment for prediction grades—other years have impacted students’ enjoyment.”

Stoller also explained the process by which each department collaborated in developing a departmental approach to the school-wide targets. “We have a whole school target, a management target, and two other targets—department and personal—all are negotiated with the line manager. Individual departments make decisions on specific targets for their departments that coincide with the school goals,” she explained. After each individual within the department established his or her personal goals, within a week they formalize their plan with their line manager based on these targets to demonstrate how they will be evaluated in meeting these targets. “Culture supports the continuous improvement plan and performance reviews are a part of this,” she said.

**Ofsted.** Nearly all of the participants mentioned the role of Ofsted in the assessment process. Participants on the administrative level particularly were aware of

the public's perceptions based on the league tables. Nearly all participants mentioned their desire to use data (for example the GCSE exam results on the league tables) to drive decision-making and ensure students continue to improve. While these league tables once were the main method Ofsted used to evaluate the quality of a school, Head Teacher Jim Ohman described a shift in the methods by which Ofsted evaluated schools, noting:

Ofsted has moved their focus from looking at all the school data and just the results to actually looking at what happens in the classroom . . . rather than just looking at those figures in a document at the end of year.

Though Ohman indicated that Ofsted is moving to a new evaluation model, several participants referenced the pressure of the external evaluation by Ofsted, noting how students' performance on the league tables drives decision-making about content, materials, and pedagogy. For example, ELA teacher Amy O'Shane provided her students with ample practice in generating and answering potential GCSE exam questions within her class in preparation for the official examination. Meanwhile, ELA teacher Jackson Hughes provided his students with sample responses to exam questions and taught his students specific essay structures that may prove beneficial in earning higher marks on the GCSEs. During my observation of his classroom, he explained the reasoning process when forming a claim and defending it through textual evidence, "This is where you are starting to think beyond GCSE and you are starting to do A-level study. If you are going to argue a point, you have to know both sides of it, and that is what we are going to do."

### **Three Themes Reveal Three Assertions**

After color-coding and combining these codes into categories, three themes emerged: (a) content standards, (b), organizational structure, and (c) professionalism. With these factors in mind, the data suggests three assertions on the role of assessing

students' learning within the school. The school assesses students' learning for (a) standardization, (b) systemization, and (c) accountability.

**Assertion 1: The School Assesses Students' Learning for Standardization.**

Similar to my experiences in North Dakota, educators in Surrey, England assess students' learning as a means to ensure students are provided a standardized, comprehensive education. As a part of this process, I found that the teachers at Whitmoor College taught similar, classic texts such as that of Tennessee Williams, as well as more modern sources that explored linguistic shifts in the English language. The school's data coordinator, Charles Rice, explained how the school was compliant with the country's expectations for a quality education:

Qualifications and Curriculum Assessment are looking at the A-level qualifications and the GCSE qualifications, and the exam boards check whether the exam boards are actually assessing these standards. Teachers then apply. The national curriculum applies to students—primary students and through year 6.

One classroom that approached the standards through a traditional text was that of Amy O'Shane, Y11 teacher. She began her class with a key focus, which she'd written on the board: "Explore key themes and character portrayal. Investigate the play's character from a feminist and gender-based reading."

To begin, O'Shane passed out a worksheet and assigned each of her students a character. She asked them to draw their impression of the character in one and a half minutes. When finished, she instructed, "For this task, choose three of them to put in the middle."

There were only five total drawings as there were only five students in this class. The students choose three and then O'Shane explained they must choose one character and explain why they would choose to be that character. Her students give critical

reasons as to why they would choose characters based on details about the character they know from the text.

“OK turn it around, give me reasons against the other two characters.”

“Big Daddy is dying of cancer. . .”

“What about Brit made you identify with him or choose him?”

“He’s always going to get money and stuff and have a good life because he’s a favorite.”

“Anybody got any questions on that one?”

“I do not believe in the whole family love marriage exists, but it’s not because I’m an alcoholic so that’s not why, but. . .” One student comments back on another student’s response.

“You do not believe in love?” another student asks.

The first student explains, “I think authority is a quite ideal position to be in. He still has respect for people. . .”

Later, O’Shane has her students reflect more deeply on William’s piece: “Is there an opposite to a feminist?” a student asks. She tells her to write that question down and explains the concept of a misogynist. She tells her that is a really good question and then tells the students to finish the question they are writing down. A student asks:

“Relationships—can we talk about same sex relationships, or does it have to be from a traditional male-female relationship perspective?”

[This is an interesting question as Tennessee Williams was gay.]

“A very feminist reading, what spin are we looking at?” another student asks.

“Do we have different extremities of feminism?” O’Shane asks.

“We take different ideologies of them,” a student responds.

“It is concentrated differently. So some women would say that is really sexist, but in law it would just say, well that’s right,” a student responds.

“Does it make a difference when the feminist perspective is taking place?”

O’Shane asks.

Her students respond. One says,

I am curious about the concept of extreme. I do not think in the second wave of the feminist movement, I do not think anyone would think that is extreme. But if you go back to the first wave of feminist movement, but it had to be more extreme because women hadn’t even got the vote. Women are working a very different life back then.

“What were women doing in the second wave to show that they were against—say like abortion clinics,” O’Shane asks.

Her students respond openly. One student says, “Everybody sorts of protests online today—you do not really get people to be passionate to do stuff again. They just take a survey online—if you are against KONY click, and if you are against—click.”

“But the burning of bras was perceived as extreme,” O’Shane probes.

A student responds to how the bra burning is feeling as though that burning the bra is as though she would be burning a sense of her identity to be accepted. Another responds that it was “as though they did not want to be confined.”

“The stereotype of the feminist in the 70s is that they are becoming more masculine. But the concept of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ is a construct,” O’Shane explains. She asks what kinds of toys they played with as a kid. They respond.

“Isn’t that interesting that the working farm is suitable to give to a little girl? Where you’re from may dictate what kinds of toys you were given,” O’Shane notes.

While the content with which students grapple in this excerpt demonstrates the need for high level of critical thinking to comprehend, I witnessed other examples of

creating an environment conducive to critical thought. For example, in my field note observations of Jackson Hughes' classroom, I described the walls:

. . . covered with movie posters and an inside picture of the globe. There are scores of authors' names and literary terms that line the room. Every available space is covered with something related to an English lesson. There are a few key displays: one has AS/A2 English Language Key Terminology with several terms such as 'lexis, pragmatics, connotation, passive voice, graphology, exclamatory, semantics, abstract noun, stative verb, syntax, auxiliary verb, lexical field' etc.

While these terms are considered standard concepts for many students in an English-Language Arts classroom, Hughes pushed the limits of students' understanding during his lesson that forced them to reconsider the English lexicon and the role of grammar in preparation for their GCSE. Recall Table 1.3 that delineated examples of the National Curriculum for an ELA student in Key Stage 4. Hughes' use of friendly debate in challenging students' perceptions of everyday language usage aligns with the standard KS.4.3: "The study of English should enable students to apply their knowledge, skills, and understanding to relevant real-world situations. For example students should prepare informal and formal presentations/debates for a variety of audiences and purposes." Meanwhile, these displayed concepts or terms align with standard KS.4.1: "There are a number of key concepts that underpin the study of English. Students need to understand these concepts in order to deepen and broaden their knowledge, skills, and understanding."

In sum, as a part of Whitmoor College's school-wide attention to providing students with a comprehensive, standardized education, educators assess students' learning to ensure students are receiving an education that incorporates each of the National Curriculum standards for English-Language Arts.



## **Assertion 2: The School Assesses Students' Learning for Systemization.**

Whitmoor College has a school-wide initiative to promote an environment that allows for continuous improvement in student achievement of the National Curriculum. As a part of this initiative, educators generated a system in which students were afforded similar opportunities to prepare for the content on which they would be externally assessed. Such opportunities included pedagogical practices, exercises, and sample content that would provide students models of exemplary work and help students understand the methods of assessment.

On the sixth day of my study, June 20, 2012, I finally began to see some clarity in how the school system in Surrey, England is assessing students' learning. An excerpt from my field notes stated:

For example I now have a better understanding of how English schools ("public" or "state" schools) determine students' course grades based on tests that are created by a test company, such as AQA that GA uses. The school must purchase the company's materials and they must pay 40 pounds per pupil to take the tests. What's more, the teachers do not write these tests, but they must essentially teach to the concepts that will be on the test-but they do not know the test questions ahead of time. Just the general theme. Two of these sections of assessments (which comprise about 60% of their grade) are graded by the teacher. The other 40% is graded by the testing company. However, to ensure that the teachers aren't just inflating their grades, the test company will randomly select students' work that they want to see and the teacher's annotations and notes, plus commentary that they think will justify why the grades are as they are.

As I delved deeper into my study, I triangulated this entry with the interviews I conducted with the schools' headmaster, curriculum director, and teachers. For example, in this excerpt of my observation of Jackson Hughes' English-Language Arts classroom in which he facilitated students' understanding of concepts in preparation for the GCSE by having them review an article by John Humphry, "English GCSE? It's just 2EZ: Dumbing down row over exam to cover grammar of mobile phone texting":

*10:15 a.m.* Hughes pulls out a quote about “slamming the language of texting” and asks them who exactly “slammed” it? This article is about exactly what they are to be doing—studying for an exam for the GCSE that asks them to write a persuasive essay about standardized language and “txt” language. . . .He walks through what they are doing and challenges them to think about what they are doing and determine if they are actually doing what the article says: “dumbing down their education.” One student says that they’ve actually learned loads.

After a brief discussion, Hughes showed his students a YouTube video on the validity of “LEET speak” or shorthand abbreviations for texting as an acceptable use of the English lexicon. Hughes related the linguistic debate to other situations in which people eschew an opinion without really knowing the true situation. “This is where you are starting to think beyond GCSE and you are starting to do A-level study. If you are going to argue a point, you have to know both sides of it, and that is what we are going to do,” he said.

Hughes puts another key question on the board that reads: “Question: But how have touch screen phones or Blackberries made a difference to the ways in which we text?”

Some students’ hands are up, and then some students answer without raising their hands.

Hughes puts the key points on the board—tells them to write down a key point because they will use this quote in their essay response.

His students write this down: “Some texters will be good spellers; some will be bad. But on the whole, the deviant spellings we see in text messaging give the

impression of people consciously manipulating the writing system, rather than making errors. David Crystal (Hon Professor of Linguistics).”

Hughes then discusses how students know how to consciously manipulate the writing process (as they know their audiences). “What is wrong with C-L-O-X?”

“I dunno,” a student says.

Later that evening, I reflected on this exchange in my field notes noting how he gave the students a quote that he wanted them to write verbatim because he expected them to use it in their GCSE essays. I questioned whether the AQA (or comparable testing agency) would recognize the similarities in writing style (something I would consider plagiarism) if they received three sample exams that all contained the very same quote.

During my follow-up interview, Jackson Hughes clarified his intent in providing students with a quote. He noted:

One of the things they’ll always ask you is if they can see something from the students and what they had prepared last year. You can say no, because they are doing a completely different question. Of course, I say no because it changes from year to year. So I will say, ‘Well this is what you can use, or this is what you can use in the construct, this is what you’re aiming for. Here’s two paragraphs, you’re aiming for a whole essay.’

Though Hughes assured me he was simply providing students with writing models for the GCSE, I wondered whether students would use these examples as models and think critically on the exam question themselves.

The danger is, and you’ve asked about it, having them write stuff down that is on the board, is that, and I’ve discussed why I make it so that there is too much for them to write it all down. Some of it will filter in, hopefully, some of the phrasing. But the risk of it is if five people are called from my group to be inspected and all five of them say exactly the same thing, it does ring significant warning bells. As a professional, there is accountability—it’s wrong. It could get you in trouble.

Hughes explained that to plan to incorporate a quote on an exam could potentially be inappropriate, as students and teachers were never aware of what the exam questions would precisely entail.

One of the challenges for Surrey teachers is to adequately prepare students on the potential content on the exam. During O'Shane's classroom observation, I noted how she created situations that mimicked the standardized exam environment by providing students with potential exam questions and walking students through the answering process:

"So what I am going to try and get you to do, I am going to give you a list of questions," she says, passing out slips of paper. "Have you received the question that you will have for your exam?" O'Shane asks.

She moves on and instructs them to generate questions they have based on the exam question. She reads one statement aloud: "How does a feminist and gender based reading of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* inform our understanding of the female and male characters and their relationships?"

A student responds to the prompt itself and says that it sounds much clearer than other exam questions she's received in the past.

Amy explains: "AS and A2 have main differences—the questions of A2 have far more direction instead of vague assumptions so that you will get the best marks."

Then she comments to the class, "You've got a minute individually to generate as many questions as you can that you would like to ask about the question." She provides them with two examples and asks, "Are there any words I need to define, or why is this question important?"

Jim Ohman, head teacher of performing arts who planned to take over as deputy head of school curriculum, believed in the importance of holding “mini-plenary sessions” to promote a greater understanding of the school improvement plan in preparation for Ofsted inspections and to provide teachers with more opportunities to explore the accreditation process in depth through specific, tailored activities. Ohman explained they need to know, “how to interact with your inspector.”

He further explained teachers need to identify with the departmental goals and objectives so that they may speak to school-wide improvements and students’ specific gains on assessments. He noted:

We had to say to a lot of teachers, that you are actually doing this, and perhaps maybe tweak it. Tell the teachers that they are actually doing this. Train all the staff in all the 41 standards down to the eight, and train staff in the new performance management structures that are coming down—competency that is coming up-close to professional conduct. There is a pastoral side to it, besides information giving.

The concept of the “pastoral” speaks to Whitmoor College’s desire to provide a school-wide culture and climate that promotes student achievement. Much like ELA teachers Jackson Hughes’ and Amy O’Shane’s aspirations to ensure students developed a sense of independent learning as a part of the assessment process, Ohman also explained students are a part of the broader-based systems planning in that, “Students can use a skill—learning gains, look for students to assess themselves and helping one-another.”

**Assertion 3: The School Assesses Students’ Learning for Accountability.** As Table 4.6 indicates, nearly every Surrey participant referenced public accountability measures through league tables, professional development and school improvement, or a system-wide response to an Ofsted evaluation. During his interview, Head Teacher Jim

Ohman revealed several reasons for assessing students learning beyond that of students' benefit:

The school held a fake Ofsted, or "mocksted", last year. The head of school [Darin LaMoine] decided to bring in some people in on the new framework that will emphasize the teaching and learning. He was concerned that if TL was not outstanding—if anything else is not outstanding, then it is OK—but if not teaching and learning, then the school cannot be graded as an outstanding.

The curriculum director, Thomas Miller, echoed Ohman's sentiments during his interview, noting:

I am responsible for input/output, standards of curriculum, what is taught and how much, and the time table and the output is when we assess retainment of students. If results aren't good enough we come under pressure from Ofsted—league tables (attainment and achievement tables) are produced every year. Ofsted provides an analysis for all of the results every year. If there are significant weaknesses, then we are expected to account for that.

High expectations for accountability purposes are supported by the teaching faculty as well. Hughes noted:

. . . we do that is partly because we are under pressure to maintain not just the A\* to C rates, but the percentage of students that achieve A\*s. We're not based simply on the proportion of students that pass above a C grade. They also are expected to make three levels of progress between primary school and the end of key stage four. That means that—and that is one of the key Ofsted criteria—that if a student comes in and they are already a bright student in year 7 and they are a level 5 at a key stage 3 measure. The bottom line is that at the end of key stage three, they would be a high level 7, which means they should be getting an A or an A\*. If they were to get a B, we would have failed that student. So we find that we tend to push the highest end and extend the highest end and teach according to ability.

While Hughes acknowledged the nationwide push to continually improve students' scores on high-stakes tests, he explained their purposed in doing so:

We're trying to make students more independent, more reflexive learners. . . . I have been through my whole class and I have three or four students that in some cases the FFT predictions are really unrealistic. For example the girl who sits at the back with the red hair is a very able student orally, but she has a specific education need. She's dyslexic. So in creative writing, she has brilliant ideas, but she will always lose marks on the technical aspects of her writing, spelling,

punctuation. Now, from my point of view, it's cruel to say, 'You're predicted at a B, you've got a C and you need to get better.'

Hughes also referenced a need for students to perform well on tests as a means for teacher accountability. He explained how teachers who opted for merit-based pay documented students' performance as evidence for an increase in salary. Head Teacher Jim Ohman also acknowledged this desire, noting, "And so this year I have three colleagues who are going through the pay review this and they will look at 10 strands that are a distillation of 41 professional standards. I observe every single teacher in their classroom every year—not typical."

While sharing lunch with Hughes in the English office on the fourth day of my school visit, I observed several teachers discussing their notes in preparation for an upcoming salary increase. They were chatting about different students' experiences, pulling out files of sample students' work, and drafting responses to specific questions on a form together, attempting to document the appropriate tone that would be acceptable for the task at hand.

Head Teacher Jim Ohman explained that the department head is required to observe every teacher on a two year cycle to assist in establishing the evidence for pay increases. "The senior leadership team will do walks to observe classrooms. They can drop in and take notes on a spreadsheet and send an e-mail with comments," Ohman said. He acknowledged that "ad hoc" observations in which the leadership team drops into the classroom unannounced may not present the "star lesson she wishes to show me for the specific observation that she has chosen to show me, but is ongoing." As a part of the evaluation process, Ohman explained, "The teacher fills out the form and then they build

evidence together, alongside the observation, and the head of school makes the decision, or queries everything that isn't clear.”

### **Summary**

In both North Dakota and in Surrey, England, the data suggested three assertions as to the role of assessing students' learning. While both the North Dakota and Surrey data led to the same three assertions due to similarities in policy, the manifestations of these assertions in practice is rather different in each locale. I will discuss these similarities and differences by explaining the connections between my theoretical matrix, conceptual framework, and these three assertions of Whitmoor College comparatively with that of Greenbriar High School in greater detail in Chapter V. In Chapter VI, I will discuss the findings and implications of my international comparative study.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

Understanding educators' perceptions in both North Dakota and Surrey may provide clarity for other educators in effectively implementing a balanced approach to assessments and using results to make informed decisions about curriculum instruction and accountability of the educational process. However, in order to better understand these perceptions revealed in the data from my interviews and observations of educators within the classroom setting, I needed to better understand the climate and culture of assessments within each setting.

#### **Theoretical Matrix**

To better understand the relationships among participants and their interactions regarding the assessment process, I constructed a theoretical matrix by which to analyze the conditions and influences for assessing students' learning (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained that matrices assist researchers in "locating a phenomenon in context . . . [to build] a systematic, logical, and integrated account" (p. 182). By contextualizing the assessment process in each locale, I was able to conceptualize the data. My research on two schools—one in North Dakota and one in Surrey, England, led to three assertions about the assessment process that are common to both cases: Schools assess for (a) standardization, (b) systemness, and (c) accountability.

For increased validity in developing my assertions, I analyzed these codes and themes by triangulating data not only among participants in each location, but also between North Dakota and Surrey (Creswell, 2011). To better understand these assertions, I developed two matrices (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) that describe the assessment process within each school. In this Chapter, I will explain each matrix in detail to provide clarity in understanding my findings on educators' perspectives about the assessment process. While the theoretical matrix for each location reveals different influences for each assertion, both North Dakota and Surrey reflected similar assertions.

### **Theoretical Analysis**

For both North Dakota and Surrey, England the core category or phenomenon of my theoretical analysis is the process of assessing students' learning. To understand the assessment process, I had to first consider the causal conditions that drive the schools' needs for assessment. Then, one must consider the actions and interactions—the processes by which schools assess students' learning—as well as the contextual and intervening conditions that affect these actions/interactions. Finally, I had to consider the resulting consequences of the assessment process.

#### **North Dakota**

Under North Dakota Century Code, Greenbriar High School must uphold an assessment policy that includes students' participation in a summative state-wide, standardized achievement test in the areas of reading, math, and science (North Dakota Century Code, 2014a). As a part of policy at the time of this study, the school required all freshman and sophomore students take a formative and summative NWEA MAP assessment in the fall and the spring of each year. Meanwhile, all juniors were required to participate in the North Dakota State Assessment in the fall, as well as the ACT or

ACT Work Keys in the spring. As a part of the NCLB requirements for AYP and accreditation, students' scores on the NDSA are placed on file and accessible as a part of the ND School Profile through the Department of Public Instruction. Meanwhile, students may use the scores they received on the ACT or the ACT Work Keys to apply to higher educational systems.

Greenbriar's policy also supports educators in their generation of course assessments for the purpose of assessing for learning (using students' performance to drive decision-making in course instruction) as well as summative assessments by which students receive course credit required for graduation.

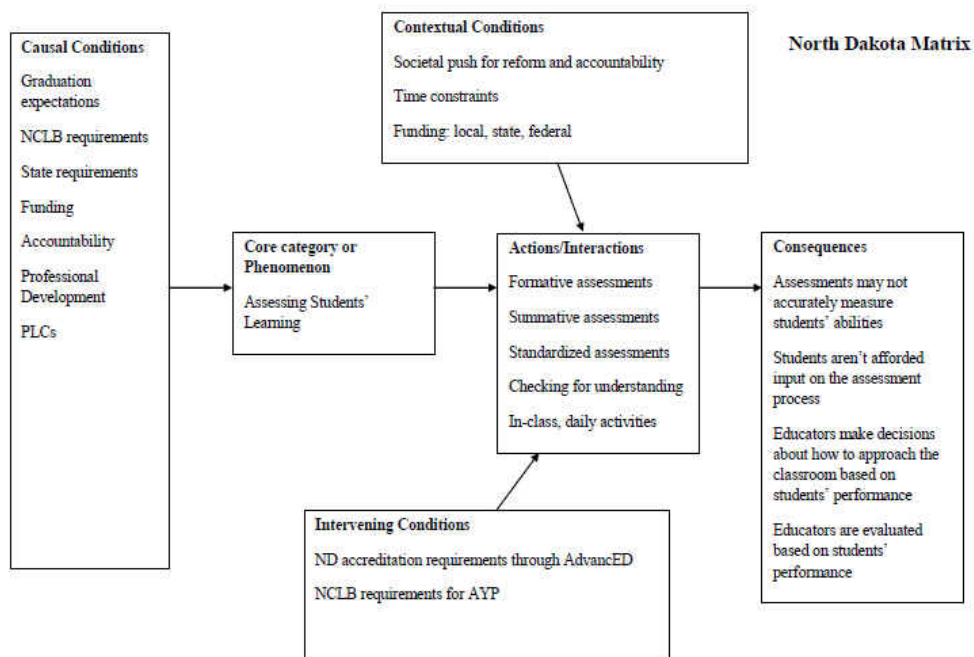


Figure 5.1 The North Dakota Matrix.

**Causal conditions.** North Dakota participants cited several reasons why they assessed students' learning. Many of them focused on the state requirements under

NCLB (2001) to meet AYP. Some participants indicated they felt pressured to meet unachievable expectations, while others indicated that they knew students could never achieve the expectations of 100% proficiency outlined by the federal Act. Meanwhile, participants also referenced the school's initiative to measure students' progress through formative and summative assessments on NWEA MAP exams. Some of these participants mentioned the data could be used to drive decision making about classroom materials and pedagogy. Several participants—especially the administrators—referenced the work the educators had completed within professional learning communities to provide professional development on effective lesson plans and assessments. While the school maintained a goal of developing effective common assessments, many participants suggested that such a task was not currently feasible due to a shift in focus to adapt to the new Common Core curriculum brought forth by the State's expectations.

**Actions/interactions.** During my observations of educators within their classroom settings, I witnessed informal assessments through classroom activities. Some teachers used rapid-fire questions and answers to ascertain students' knowledge of course content, while one teacher incorporated short presentations in which students had one class period to read and summarize a newspaper article, reporting on their findings to the class. Through follow-up interviews I was able to ascertain how these checks for understanding and daily activities helped teachers prepare students for summative assessments that carried greater weight in their final grades, and ultimately, credit for their course.

Several teachers indicated they had concerns about the administration's desire to have them create common assessments. Some felt that such assessments were incapable of truly measuring what students could know or do, while others feared that such

assessments would be used for accountability measures—not only of the students (as they would inherently be designed to do), but also of the teachers as a means of comparison, to direct conversations within PLCs and evaluations by the administration.

Participants acknowledged that the school provided students with several externally generated, standardized tests, such as that of the NDSA, ACT, and NWEA MAP. However, many of them felt that these tests were few in number and that the majority of the assessments students were required to take were designed by teachers for the sole purpose of assessing students' learning for students' accountability on a standardized curriculum.

**Contextual conditions.** Much like other schools in North Dakota, Greenbriar experienced the societal push for reform and accountability. Curriculum Director Kurt Brown explained how Greenbriar's school district once was considered a "beacon institution" in its ability to implement cutting edge curriculum initiatives. However, he said that in recent years the school district lost ground when compared to other districts of similar size and demographics across North Dakota. Dr. Brown and Principal Jared White explained the school's attention to developing relevant curricula and common assessments was essential in preparing students who were college and career ready.

Due to the state requirement that all public schools assess students using the NDSA and the ACT every fall and spring, Greenbriar's assessment policy reflected this requirement. Participants, such as Allison Shriver, indicated that in the coming weeks or month prior to the assessments, educators prepare students by specifically reviewing set skills that typically are featured on the English-Language Arts portion of the standardized exams. While some participants indicated this may feel as though they are teaching to the test, they acknowledged that they reviewed concepts generally taught within their

courses and to prepare students in understanding the format and expectations of each assessment.

Because some state and federal funding is tied to the standardized assessments in which Greenbriar students participate, as well as the public distribution of the schools' performance in meeting AYP, there is an increased push for students to perform well on the NDSA and ACT (Chapter 15.1-21: Curriculum and testing).

**Intervening conditions.** While the teachers perceived pressures from the school's administration to ensure students achieved proficiency on the state standards, the administrators voiced their concerns about the pressures from the district and the State to ensure students achieved proficiency (AYP) under NCLB. Meanwhile, one administrator referenced the requirements for all educators to use assessments as a part of the accreditation process, citing AdvancED's standard that schools are committed to continuous improvement. This standard also is upheld by North Dakota's Department of Public instruction under legislative authority per NDCC 15.1-06-06, that states, "The school participates in and meets the requirements of a review process that is: (1) Designed to improve student achievement through a continuous cycle of improvement" (p. 4).

**Consequences.** Some participants commented that they felt as though some of the assessments students take (such as the external, standardized assessments) may not accurately measure students' abilities. Many also indicated that they were wary of the school's implementation of common assessments, fearing the exams would undermine their authority to run their classes efficiently and effectively.

My interviews and observations of educators in their classrooms suggested educators made decisions about how to approach their classrooms based on students'

performance on assessments. Some of these assessments were informal, such as question/answer sessions that are designed to check for students' understanding, or short presentations on material students have prepared during class. Many of these participants "switched gears" during classroom activities based on their perceptions of students abilities.

The data from my observations and interviews revealed students have little opportunity to provide input on the assessment process. While students occasionally gauged their performance on course content through self-assessments or "I Can" statements, they were not responsible for developing the content on which they are assessed nor the rubrics and other criteria by which their performance was measured. Rather, individual teachers, or teams of teachers developed course assessments and common assessments.

As a part of the school district initiative to meet potential statewide expectations per NCLB waivers, during the time of this study, Greenbriar High School was in the process of adopting the Marzano teacher evaluation program. Curriculum Director Kurt Brown indicated that school administrators would be receiving professional development in August 2012 in preparation for the launch of the new evaluation program. Because of the nationwide push for accountability and school improvement, some educators worried this new evaluation program would include the results of students' performance on standardized assessments such as the NDSA. Others were wary of the agenda of the district's curriculum team and instructional coaches, fearing that the attention to students' performance within PLC discussions would create unnecessary competitiveness or animosity among colleagues. Meanwhile, some teachers did not value the NDSA or the ACT assessments, as Gene Smiley noted:

I really do not care what they get on the assessments. . . . Because if I can get them to think, to look at things in a different way those scores will go up. We're not necessarily going to spend a week looking at what is a predicate nominative for those two questions on the state assessment so they can nail it. I'm not going to do that, but I think by making them think critically, and to look at texts intelligently, their scores are going to improve, not only in English, but across the board.

Nationally, educators have voiced their concerns in using students' data to evaluate teachers' performance due to the fact that not all subject areas are assessed on these external standardized assessments.

By considering the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions in the process of assessing students' learning at Greenbriar High School, I was better able to understand the role of assessments in generating specific actions, interactions, and consequences. This matrix assisted me in conceptualizing the processes by which assessing students' learning suggested my three assertions in that Greenbriar educators assess students' learning for standardization, systemization, and accountability. To better understand the similarities and differences in the culture and climate of the assessment process between Greenbriar High School in North Dakota and Whitmoor College in Surrey, England I generated a similar matrix for Whitmoor College, which I will explain in further detail in the next section.

### **Surrey, England**

According to the student handbook, the assessment policy in Surrey follows the principles of Assessment for Learning by implementing procedures such as letter grades awarded for students' efforts on classroom assignments and attainment through oral and written feedback provided by classroom teachers, documentation of GCSE grades, and oral or written self- and peer evaluations. The school prospectus the school stresses progress monitoring through frequent assessments of students' learning. Educators then



use students' results to tailor lessons for each class and/or individual student. GCSEs are taken in the fall and in the spring. According to the school's Key Stage 4 Curriculum Model, if students do not receive passing grades (A\*-C), or students are at risk for not earning passing grades, the school policy is to provide students a "study plus" in which students may receive supplemental instruction in English and mathematics by dropping an elective subject or a foreign language course.

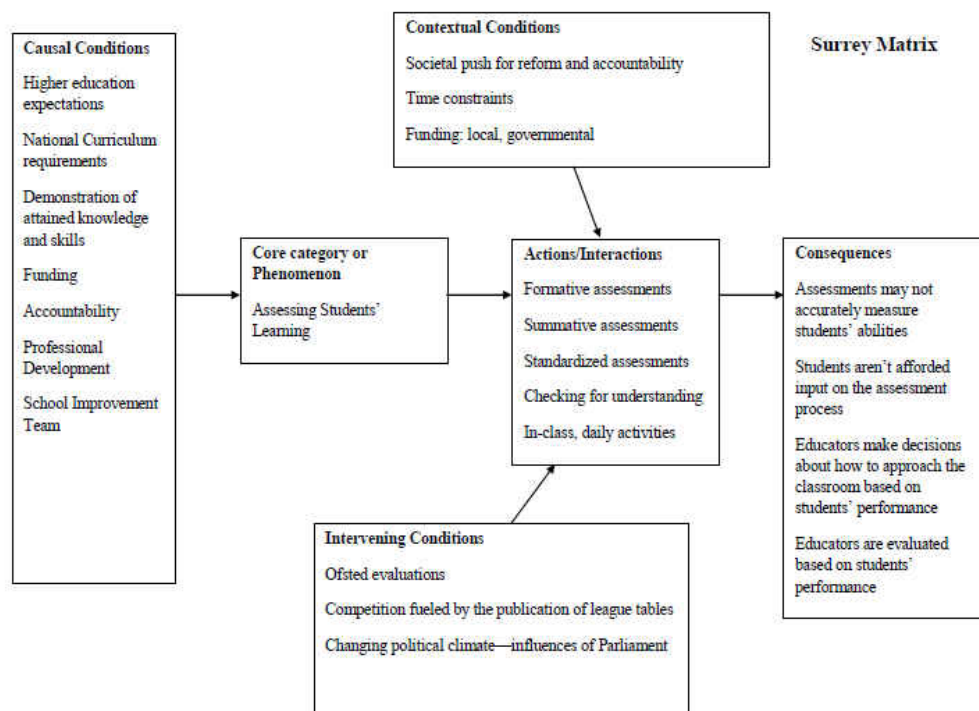


Figure 5.2. The Surrey Matrix.

**Casual conditions.** As a part of a greater country-wide effort to ensure students receive a comprehensive education based on the National Curriculum requirements, students take external exams including the SATs (for younger, primary students) and the GCSE (for older, secondary students). These exams are designed by external testing agencies to measure students' abilities on specifically attained knowledge and skills,

including the content covered within English-Language Arts classrooms. This curriculum was designed to meet the community's need for students receive "the core of general learning and experience essential to later learning and employment" (The National Curriculum 1), with expectations placed on the school to meet the requirements set forth by the Department for Education (influenced by the nations' institutions of higher education).

To meet these expectations, Head of School Yvonne Stoller and Jim Ohman, Performing Arts head teacher both spoke of an increased attention to the school's role in professional development, in which educators used students' performance data to inform decisions about their own professional development needs. Due to school-wide accountability through administrative oversight and external Ofsted evaluations, teachers were keenly aware of their role in guiding students through the assessment process. Educator Jackson Hughes indicated that every teacher was responsible for accounting for data discrepancies; the expectation that all students would continuously improve.

**Actions/interactions.** My observations of Whitmoor College's classrooms revealed educators assess for students' learning in a similar fashion to that of North Dakota teachers. I witnessed students answering a series of rapid-fire questions, as well as smaller, informal group discussions on given topics. Students in Jim Ohman's class also presented their knowledge in the form of short skits in which he had all his students huddle up to analyze the effectiveness of each skit in demonstrating the learning goals. Jackson Hughes also mentioned the use of formative assessments within his classroom to gauge students' abilities and better prepare them for the summative, standardized GCSEs.

**Contextual conditions.** Similar to North Dakota, Surrey, England has experienced a societal push for educational reform. The influences of outcome-based

education affected the methods by which schools assessed students' learning. Moving from the O-Level exams to the GCSEs shifted educators' pedagogical practices and their attention to students' needs. For example, Jackson Hughes indicated he empathized with a student who had a learning disability, but that he worked harder with this student to improve her performance in other areas of the exam to account for her potentially lower marks. Similar to his colleagues, Hughes also indicated he felt the push to ensure all of his students earned higher marks than required for earning credit (A\* through C), and that he supported the school's emphasis in ensuring every student is committed to continuously improving their performance.

**Intervening conditions.** Because Ofsted publishes the results of each school's performance on the GCSEs in the form of a league table, there has been an increased societal push for reform and accountability. These results generate competition among schools to increase their student enrollment, which can mean increased funding. Coupled with the push for reform by Secretary of Education Michael Gove, school officials, such as Darin LaMoine and Yvonne Stoller at Whitmoor College watch the ever-changing political climate to ensure they are abreast of current trends and new policies as they arise.

**Consequences.** Some participants indicated they were concerned that some assessments may not accurately measure students' abilities. For example, educator Jackson Hughes' explained how his student who has dyslexia could never earn the highest marks for her spelling, but her inability to spell well had no bearing on her ability to write a cohesive essay. When asked if he had the opportunity to provide input on the creation of external evaluations and review their relevancy, Hughes said that he did not, and he was not certain if anyone at the school did. He noted, however, that testing

companies such as AQA hire competent professionals who should know the curriculum and student expectations well enough to write an appropriate exam.

Much like the educators, students aren't afforded input on the assessment process either. Some participants questioned whether the assessments would lose validity if educators and students had the opportunity to provide input about the external assessment process. During my observations and interviews, I also questioned whether students had the opportunity to make choices about the assessment process. Hughes noted that educators could select from a series of topics and texts on which to prepare students. The students had to answer a specific number of prompts or questions (for example they had to create a project or write an essay) that demonstrated their skill set in that subject area (literature or language for English Language Arts).

Educators also make decisions about how to approach the classroom based on students' performance, tracking them based on their previous assessment scores and classroom activities. For example, Hughes reviews an internal database of students' marks that are submitted by individual teachers at Whitmoor College. In this database, he can see their Fisher Family Trust minimum target, which established a baseline goal. He commented that students' efforts are not tracked for grades, but rather students' performance on the external controlled exams. "It's absolutely brutal," Hughes lamented. Hughes explained that he watched the database "like a hawk" to ensure that he is able to get students the marks they are predicted or higher.

Finally, educators are evaluated based on students' performance. During a lunch hour that I shared with several English teachers, I witnessed mentor teachers guiding less-experienced teachers through a process of self-assessment in which the teacher had to answer a series of questions for her evaluation about her teaching practices. She also had

to provide samples of students' work to support as evidence that she was committed to students' improvement. When I spoke with Jim Ohman about the professional development process, he noted that many of these teachers are amassing this information in preparation for merit-based pay. After teachers have been teaching for six years, he explained that they have the option to potentially earn higher pay by demonstrating their achievements by meeting expectations delineated through their performance evaluations.

### **Summary**

By creating two matrices in which I considered the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions in the process of assessing students' learning at both Greenbriar High School in North Dakota and at Whitmoor College in Surrey, I was better able to conceptualize the school-wide processes in which educators assess students' learning—the actions, interactions, and consequences of these assessments reflect my three assertions that educators assess students' learning for standardization, systemization, and accountability. This process also helped me to more accurately interpret my data by analyzing the similarities and differences in the culture and climate of the assessment process between the two schools. In Chapter VI, I will discuss my findings in relation to my research questions and explain the implications for educational leaders in implementing a school-wide process for effective balanced assessments.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

Globally, there has been a push for educational reform through an attention to outcome-based education in students' preparation for college and career readiness (OECD, n.d). As a result, external, summative evaluations of students' learning have affected the way educators instruct students on core curricula in English and mathematics (Au, 2011; Stiggins, 2007, 2008). Economic factors and political affiliations also continue to influence educational reforms in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Sutton and Levinson (2001) explained how educational policy has the ability to define an "educated person," through the delineation of required knowledge and skills for college and career preparation.

#### **Overview of This Study**

The framework for this international comparative study was influenced by the research of Stiggins et al. (2011) at the Assessment Training Institute and by the Assessment Reform Group (2002). The framework (Figure 1.1) hinges on the concept that each key element of the assessment process works together to create a system of balanced assessment. The framework outlines that AfL is for all stakeholders including students, teachers, administrators, districts, state/country; develops students' abilities to self-assess and improve; increases accountability; promotes learning goals and shared

criteria; is central to daily classroom activities through student and teacher collaboration; affords flexibility; and is constructive and sensitive to students' needs.

However, the theory about AfL upheld by ATI and ARG may differ from educators' implementation of AfL principles within the classroom. To better understand educators' perspectives about AfL and balanced assessment policies and practices, I interviewed and observed educators at one secondary school in North Dakota and one secondary school in Surrey, England for this study. My goal was to answer three research questions that were designed to measure each participant's perceptions about the assessment process in relation to the aforementioned framework:

1. What are secondary (students ages 14-18) educators' beliefs about what, why, how, and for whom school systems are assessing students' learning?
2. What is the difference between educators' beliefs about assessment and the processes in which they assess students' learning?
3. Do educators perceive a balance of assessments of students' learning?

I observed and subsequently interviewed several educators at each location and after I transcribed my recorded face-to-face interviews, I used elements of the phenomenological and ethnographical approaches to conduct my data analysis (Creswell, 2007). I structurally coded my interviews, observations, and field notes (Saldana, 2011), looking for significant statements or themes that demonstrated patterns that I could deconstruct and reconstruct, leading to "naturalistic generalizations" (Creswell, 2007, p. 163).

Influenced by my initial reading and content analysis, I found four broad-based codes: "what," "why," "how," and "for whom." Each of these codes contained varied data that revealed participants' perspectives on the content educators were teaching and

assessing, their reasons for assessing, their methods of assessing, and who would use the results of the assessments. For example, “what” could be found in the required texts or materials to support a standardized curriculum, such as the canonical classics. In both North Dakota and in Surrey, England, educators taught Tennyson’s works. “Why” was demonstrated by educators’ perceived reasons for assessing students’ learning; for example, some educators wanted to gain a sense of students’ abilities prior to more in-depth instruction. “How” demonstrated the methods by which educators assessed students’ learning—whether formative and informal or summative and standardized. “For whom” related to whom that data was reported and whom was affected as a result of the data, such as the student, teacher, school, or district (as external measures of accountability). Such data could demonstrate students’ mastery of standardized content and skills, could serve as evidence for teachers who are applying for merit-based pay (in Surrey), or could provide a school/district with additional funding and credibility (such as through NCLB or England’s Department for Education league tables).

As I began to deconstruct these broad-based codes, however, I found sub-codes to be far more revealing—“Common Core” and “21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning” are more precise and provide more validity through the use of *in vivo* terms. Upon further analysis, I used these more refined, specific codes to build categories that revealed subsequent themes and ultimately led to my assertions.

As a result of my analysis, three assertions emerged: Schools assess students’ learning for (a) standardization, (b) systemization, and (c) accountability. Upon further analysis, these assertions answer my research questions and speak to a school’s need to maintain fluidity in its systemization of the assessment for learning process, depicted in my conceptual framework (Figure 1.1), the theoretical matrices (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) and



analyses represented in Tables 6.1 and 6.2. For example, I found that North Dakota assesses students’ learning both through formative and summative assessments on not only a standards-based curriculum, but also on social and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills. Because the content, purpose, and stakeholders involved for each of these assessments is different in that educators are assessing for student, teacher, school improvement and accountability, the methods in which students are assessed changes, represented in Tables 6.1 and 6.2. For example in North Dakota, the assessments based on the “Six Pillars of Character” are designed to gauge students’ aptitude on social skills and are intended for students’ benefit; however, such assessments are not used to determine teacher or school accountability on statewide educational standards. Comparatively, in Surrey, England students take the “PASS” test to determine their likelihood to succeed, but the performance on such tests is not reported to Ofsted and the data is not reported on league tables.

Table 6.1. North Dakota Analysis of the Assessment Process.

<b>What</b>	<b>Why</b>	<b>How</b>	<b>For Whom</b>
Social skills/character	Student improvement	Teacher led	Students
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills	Student and teacher improvement	School district led	Students and teachers
Standards-based curriculum	Student, teacher, and district improvement	State led	Students, teachers, and school/district

Table 6.2. Surrey, England Analysis of the Assessment Process.

<b>What</b>	<b>Why</b>	<b>How</b>	<b>For Whom</b>
Pastoral	Student improvement	Teacher and school led	Students
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills	Student and teacher improvement	Teacher, school, and governmentally led	Students and teachers
Standards-based curriculum	Student, teacher, and district improvement	Governmentally led	Students, teachers, and school

The central tenets of AfL maintain the importance of educators' facilitation of students' understanding of content standards by using a variety of assessments—including student-generated self-assessments to inform instruction and make changes in the learning process when necessary (Stiggins, 2008). The answers to the following research questions explored in this study explain educators' beliefs about AfL in creating assessment balance in an outcome-based learning environment in both North Dakota and in Surrey, England.

## **Discussion**

***Question 1: What are secondary (students ages 14-18) educators' beliefs about what, why, how, and for whom school systems are assessing students' learning in English Language Arts?***

In each setting, educators focused on the English Language Arts curriculum standards as part of a greater standardization process. Many of the educators in North Dakota indicated that they assessed students' learning based on the North Dakota curriculum standards for education, but that they felt as though they were required to teach and assess concepts that were not delineated by the State, including for example, the six "Pillars of Character." However, these educators recognized the Greenbriar High School's ability to provide students a comprehensive education was not measured by any external evaluations (such as the NDSA or ACT) on the principles of character education.

By comparison in Surrey, England educators strictly emphasized the National Curriculum Standards, but acknowledged that to provide a culture and climate conducive to students' education there was a "pastoral" element to the teaching process. For example, to provide a closer attention to students' pastoral (emotional, social, or

religious) needs, educators charged with pastoral oversight administered the “PASS” exam to understand students’ social and emotional abilities and determine their ability to be successful within the school setting. Similar to North Dakota’s informal assessments on the six-pillars of character, the findings on this exam were not reported on the league tables as a part of school-wide accountability.

Sewell (2008) contended that a standardized ELA curriculum supports the needs of businesses and organizations but lacks an attention to students’ needs and interests. During my observations, I found that in both North Dakota and Surrey, England, students were truly engaged and interested in the texts presented to them, and made broader connections to the texts beyond the classroom setting. Furthermore, in many instances, the actual texts or content taught within classrooms were similar. In both North Dakota and Surrey, educators used the works of homosexual writers, such as Tennessee Williams and Alfred Lord Tennyson. However, the ensuing discussions stemming from students’ analysis of the texts were strikingly different. In Surrey, for example, ELA teacher Amy O’Shane encouraged her students to explore more risqué topics of sexuality and feminine dominance in culture in William’s work. These conversations were student-driven—O’Shane occasionally stepped in to encourage students to support their claims through textual evidence. Meanwhile, the conversations on Tennyson’s work in Susan Jones’ class in North Dakota were far more teacher-led and subdued. Perhaps these differences may be accounted for by the differences in the textual topics or in the teachers’ methods; however, I am more inclined to attribute the difference to the differences in the student demographics or cultural expectations. To put it another way, O’Shane’s class was strictly comprised of young women, whereas Jones’ class was far more gender-balanced.

In each locale, educators assessed students' learning formatively, to ascertain students' knowledge prior to instruction, and summatively to gauge whether students had learned the desired knowledge and skills through the course of the unit or lesson. However, in both North Dakota and in Surrey, though the measured content was similar, the assessment design and application was different. For example, each classroom teacher implemented similar pedagogical practices, including rapid-fire line of questioning to gauge whether students understood course material. However, in North Dakota, students frequently were assessed through a series of unit-based assessments, designed by the teacher, which led to the students' overall course grade. Whereas in Surrey, students took an occasional "mock-GCSE" exam designed by the teacher in preparation for the real GCSE exam that is administered in a controlled environment, of which portions are graded by an external testing agency. Rather than providing students with a report card that documented students' grades for the course as determined by the teacher (a common practice in North Dakota), in Surrey, England, students' interim grades are predicted based on teachers' perceptions of their classroom performance—predicted, as teachers do not create nor conduct the assessments. Rather, for the majority of the GCSE the external testing agency provides the school with a measurement of students' abilities on the GCSE, which determines whether a student has met the requirements for the course. ELA teacher Jackson Hughes explained the exams are taken in a controlled environment, monitored by AQA; however, certain project-based portions of the exam he assessed, but he must maintain students' documents to demonstrate his assessment process.

In sum, in both Surrey and North Dakota, educators assessed students' learning on a standardized ELA curriculum that specified specific concepts and skills students should

learn during the course of their secondary education. Because the content, purpose, and stakeholders involved for each of these assessments is different in that educators are assessing for student, teacher, school improvement and accountability, the methods in which students were assessed changed. Students were assessed for a variety of reasons in a variety of ways: in both locales, students were assessed for student, teacher, and school accountability through external, standardized assessments. Meanwhile, educators also assessed students informally through teacher-generated classroom activities to inform their instruction. Data obtained from these assessments was intended to benefit students, teachers, and school. Students were required to demonstrate content mastery, teachers were required to provide evidence of their teaching efforts, and each school was required to establish credibility for accreditation purposes.

***Question 2: What is the difference between educators’ beliefs about assessment and the processes in which they assess students’ learning?***

In both Surrey, England and North Dakota, participants indicated they felt students take far too many exams (whether internal or external); however, they noted that such exams were required to properly measure students’ abilities and inform instructional practices. In North Dakota, several educators indicated that while they must uphold the North Dakota Educational Standards for ELA, they also experienced pressure to instruct and assess students on other content, including the six “Pillars of Character.” Several educators noted that the course texts could explicitly be applied to the required course content under the state standards, but such texts also taught students life lessons that helped shape them into model citizens of good moral standing.

At Whitmoor College, Head of School Yvonne Stoller commented that her school not only provides her students with a comprehensive education through an attention to

the National Curriculum, but that the school also meets students' "pastoral" needs, including interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills, or citizenship. Students are offered courses in religion and may participate in optional school-wide religious assemblies that are generally "Christian in nature," according to the school's prospectus. I briefly met with the Head Teacher of Pastoral Care, who indicated that the school assessed all Y7 students upon entering Whitmoor College to measure their likelihood for academic "success" based on how a student perceives the world and their likelihood to participate in "risky" behaviors that could interfere with their coursework. Data obtained from the "PASS" test was provided to classroom teachers as needed to inform instruction for students who were at risk for failure to thrive in the school setting. When I interviewed classroom teachers such as Jim Ohman, Amy O'Shane, and Jackson Hughes, none of them were familiar with the PASS test. However, special education teacher, Sharon Duchess, was familiar with the test as she had reviewed the data for a few of the students with whom she worked. This may suggest that educators at Whitmoor College receive data on a "need-to-know" basis, and that while the school is externally evaluated for performance on exams such as the GCSE which is reported nationally through Ofsted's league tables, students' "pastoral" needs are not externally reported and are not considered a basis by which schools are measured for accountability.

Research shows that outcome-based assessments may contain bias (Guskey, 2007) or do not include students in designing assessment process, which may inherently inhibit students' performance (Clarke, 2010; Stiggins, 2008). Both North Dakota and Surrey implemented external, outcome-based assessments such as the NDSA and GCSE as a means of measuring accountability for students, teachers, and schools. While students in Surrey were encouraged to become more self-reliant in their educational

process, they had few opportunities to influence the methods by which they were assessed. For that matter, because Surrey students took exams that were high-stakes, outcome-based external assessments, the educators who taught them the knowledge and skills had little (if any) opportunity to influence these exams as well. Furthermore, several Surrey educators questioned whether they would be able to design effective assessments that were unbiased due to their relationship with students and the level of external accountability and competitiveness (among schools through the league tables) placed on the assessment process itself. Ironically, I witnessed these very educators effectively assess students within their classroom settings formatively, and in doing so, these educators modified their instruction based on students' performance.

To clarify, the data I obtained through observing and interviewing educators in North Dakota suggests educators support an assessment policy that entrusts teachers to design and administer assessments to measure students' knowledge and skills on a standardized ELA curriculum for course credit. School policy (per NDCC) and educators' practice also maintains students are assessed for school accountability through the NDSA. However, in both of these instances, students have little opportunity to provide feedback on the content of the assessments or the methods by which they are assessed. Teachers and other educational professionals are afforded the opportunity to review and revise the NDSA to make certain the exam is grade-level appropriate per the North Dakota ELA standards.

Meanwhile, Surrey's data suggests Whitmoor College educators support an assessment policy that requires them to prepare students for high-stakes, external exams such as the GCSE. These educators do not have the opportunity to review or make recommendations on the exam. Educators trusted the test companies, noting they were

certain these companies hired ELA experts. Furthermore, educators were concerned that if they had an opportunity to review exams and make recommendations, they would inadvertently create exam bias.

***Question 3: Do educators perceive a balance of assessments of students' learning?***

Au (2011) noted for an effective assessment process, the ends must serve the means, which could potentially create assessment imbalance and de-professionalize the field of education. However, educators at Greenbriar High School did not perceive an imbalance between students' formative and summative assessments of their learning, based on Stiggins' (2008) definition. While many educators at Greenbriar indicated they felt students were required to take too many external assessments as measurements for AYP under state and federal regulations, they noted that the majority of the assessments students take—whether informal or formal, formative or summative—are written by educators for use within their own classrooms as a means of measuring students' competence for course credit.

Some North Dakota participants discussed their concerns for Greenbriar High School's common assessment initiative, in which educators designed summative exams collaboratively through PLCs facilitated by the curriculum director and instructional coaches. These educators distrusted the influence these assessments would have on their course curriculum. For example, Gene Smiley commented on how educators feared the common assessments would force teachers to educate students on the same novels each quarter, resulting in inequities in access to texts and classroom materials across the district and an increased lack of authority and ownership over one's classroom. Meanwhile, these educators also were not comfortable with some of the content or



methods by which students were assessed on the NDSA or the ACT. However, they felt little authority in influencing the legislature to change State law that requires schools to administer the exam. Rather, educators attempted to prepare students for the content and format of the exams through classroom activities.

England's Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment (AAIA) (2006) explained the need for educators to implement a variety of pedagogical and assessment strategies within the classroom setting on a daily basis to better understand students' abilities. In Surrey, England, Whitmoor College educators also did not perceive an assessment imbalance. Educators relied on external testing agencies to provide "valid exams" and a few questioned whether teachers could generate unbiased exams that would accurately assess students. While educators did not believe they were capable of generating unbiased assessments, ongoing, systematic, formative assessments can be teacher-generated and teacher-led, AAIA (2006) explained. Though several participants voiced concerns over Michael Gove's push to revive the O'Level exams, some indicated they felt such a move would restore an attention to a more rigorous education in which students could not retake exams in which they performed poorly.

In sum, at both schools educators designed formative assessments for use within their classrooms to inform decisions about course instruction and activities. Unlike the school in North Dakota, however, Whitmoor College educators did not design assessments that would determine students' competence for course credit. In both instances, neither the North Dakota participants nor the Surrey, England participants perceived an assessment imbalance. However, based on Stiggins' (2008) definition of assessment balance, due to the perceived lack of authority over the assessment process in

Surrey and the emphasis placed on the summative GCSEs by Ofsted, educators there may be experiencing assessment imbalance.

### **Implications**

While many educational “experts” try to move ahead promising student success and the efficacy of educational systems through fad programs, curricular materials, and textbooks, educational leaders often have to navigate political affiliations and alliances in attempting to provide students with state-of-the-art educational reform. Under the push for educational reform with states such as North Dakota embracing the Common Core standards, or England’s reconsideration of the O-Level exam, there is an increased demand for assessment accuracy and accountability. For example, with North Dakota’s recent decision to transition to the summative state-wide exam offered by SmarterBalanced, students may be required to transfer learned knowledge and skills to new applications (Baesler, 2013a, 2013b). Furthermore, the central tenets of AfL maintain the importance of educators’ facilitation of students’ understanding of content standards by using a variety of assessments to inform instruction and make changes in the learning process when necessary (Stiggins, 2008). While the implications of this study may pose direct recommendations for each participating school and its staff in implementing AfL and a balanced assessments, the results of this study imply a greater, international connectivity to school systems that function similarly to that of the United States and England, including systems in Australia, Canada, Finland, France and Ireland (to name a few) that potentially assess students’ learning for standardization, systemization, and accountability (OECD, n.d.).

In striving for effective educational reform, Fullan (2008) posited a school district must meet three criteria: “(a) systemness, (b) positive movement, and (c) motivation” (p.

275). Meanwhile, Stiggins (2008) delineated specific, essential actions for educational leaders to create a system that supports valid assessments, including “(a) assessment balance and quality, (b) refined academic standards, (c) learners’ self-evaluation and internal motivation, (d) improved feedback, and (e) educators’ assessment literacy” (p. 1).

Both Fullan (2008) and Stiggins (2008) reflect the need for clarity in stakeholders’ motivation to provide a comprehensive and cohesive educational system. My three assertions, that educators assess students’ learning for (a) standardization, (b) systemness, and (c) accountability, imply educational leaders should take a direct approach in creating an educational system that supports a process of balanced assessments. My research shows that educators uphold assessment policies and practices that require increasing accountability for instruction on a standardized ELA curriculum due to a perceived need for students to be more prepared for higher education and careers after their secondary education. To create a system that facilitates assessments that meet these needs through an attention to the “Whole Child,” educational leaders at the state and local levels should: (a) create a unified goal for school improvement, (b) establish and oversee a comprehensive action plan, and (c) provide differentiated professional development.

### **Educational Leaders Should Create a Unified Goal for School Improvement**

If school officials at both the national and local levels and their stakeholders want to create educational settings that afford assessment balance and meet the needs of each student as an individual (Whole Child), then educators need to lead all stakeholders in identifying a comprehensive, unified goal for school improvement and educational reform. Kilgore and Reynolds (2011) found school systems that lack clear criteria or

enough data to make informed decisions often suffer setbacks when embracing change. For example, if schools intend to implement assessment policies that afford an attention to a more balanced assessment, then school leadership needs to identify clear, attainable achievement goals through a mission or vision statement that is upheld by all educators school-wide and informs their decision-making or action plans.

Daugherty et al. (2012) found school systems were more effective in preparing students for higher education if educators provided a “vertically-integrated, standardized curriculum and related assessments.” The Whole Child initiative (in the U.S.) also contends schools should provide a culture and climate that engages and challenges students, while maintaining a focus on overall student health and well-being (ASCD, 2014). My research also suggests these findings, as well as Rose’s (2011) contention that educational leaders need to develop a more comprehensible, conceptual framework for reform that is grounded in an understanding of the emotional and cognitive needs of today’s school children. While Whitmoor College did not have the avenue to question the validity of the external evaluations such as the GCSE, for example, educators there did have the ability to provide formative assessments of students’ learning that could inform their instruction on students’ needs.

With the influence of Black and Wiliam’s (1998) seminal text “Inside the Black Box,” AAIA supports professional development for teachers who strive to create assessments for learning that include “questioning, feedback, and peer/self assessment” (GL Assessment, 2014). Whitmoor College reflected the initiative set forth by AAIA in that it had a school-wide initiative to foster students’ abilities to develop independent learning, and in doing so, educators followed an assessment policy that required students

to provide constructive self- and peer-feedback to track one's own progress on the National Curriculum and school-wide identified learning targets.

Comparatively, Greenbriar High School educators were provided the opportunity to review and evaluate the NDSA and make recommendations for improved accuracy and validity. However, the school did not require its educators to provide an environment in which students were required to provide constructive self- and peer-feedback; however, it was making strides in self-assessment as a few participants indicated they had developed student-directed self-assessments ("I-Can" statements) based on the North Dakota Educational Standards.

Meanwhile, both schools also applied instruction geared toward developing students into "model citizens," in which students could develop a sense of internal motivation, but no specific policy directed toward internal motivation existed at Greenbriar High School. Whitmoor College, on the other hand, emphasized students' roles in the educational process and facilitated students' self-awareness through its pastoral program.

### **Educational Leaders Should Establish and Oversee a Comprehensive Action Plan**

The efficacy of a balanced assessment system hinges on national and local school official's attention to fostering communication and a clear action plan that provides clarity to all stakeholders in their role in assessing students for learning. For example, educators at Whitmoor College incorporated assessments as a tool to guide and support educators and students toward students' academic success. This action aligned with the U.K. Department for Education's "Five-stage Cycle for School Improvement" program that assists educators in interpreting data obtained from the state's Standard Attainment

Tasks and Tests assessment that students to better plan for students' attainment of the desired learning targets (Gregory & Clarke, 2003).

School improvement cycles often rely heavily on the assessment process as a part of a school-wide program evaluation for student, teacher, and school accountability. Stiggins (2008) suggested educators reconsider their feedback strategies and build toward internal motivations as students begin to succeed, noting that the assessment "must fit the context by providing that specific information in a timely and understandable manner" (Stiggins, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, educational reform models driven by data can prevent, reverse, or reduce learning impairments through prevention and intervention efforts (Kalberg et al., 2010, p. 562). North Dakota educators including those who serve Greenbriar High School could learn from the Whitmoor College administrative team in creating a system for monitoring students' academic progress and likelihood to succeed on specific, whole-school academic targets. The A/L policy outlined by Whitmoor College includes educators' attention to formative assessments as diagnostic tools by which educators inform their instructional practices for each student as an individual. According to the school prospectus, students' performance on exams that measure "oral, written, graphic, [and] problem solving" skills are reported through term "target sheets" as progress monitoring. Students also review these target sheets and set personal achievement goals based on their performance. To clarify, perhaps schools in North Dakota could move to a standards-based grading system in which students do not receive term grades solely based on teachers' perceptions of students' performance on classroom activities. Rather, students could be assessed on specific standards formatively at the beginning of a term as a diagnostic tool to inform educators' pedagogy for individual students. Then, educators would assess students' learning summatively at the end of a

term to gauge students' attained knowledge and skills on specific standards. Reporting of the assessment results may not be in the form of a letter grade (A, B, C, and so forth), but rather could be in the form of "novice, partially proficient, proficient, and advanced." This may provide schools a more accurate and accountable measurement of students' performance on a standardized curriculum.

Meanwhile, Whitmoor College could gain perspective on its assessment practices by encouraging educators to create internal exams that would provide students with more opportunities to practice skills prior to taking the GCSE. For example, educators at Greenbriar High School worked within PLCs to analyze the standardized curriculum, identifying key concepts and skills on which to assess students' learning. Based on their analysis, these educators worked collaboratively to develop common assessments to measure students' performance on skills such as reading comprehension and writing fluency. Though some educators at Greenbriar feared the collaborative process would undermine their authority within their classrooms, or the common assessments they designed could potentially be used against them as a means of gauging teacher competence for accountability, administrators Dr. Brown and Dr. White cited the benefits of creating a collaborative system and referenced professional development such as educators' work with creating a pyramid response to intervention (Buffum 2008) as a part of school- and district-wide professional development. Curriculum Director Brown's and Principal White's attention to promoting a collaborative learning environment for educators to advance students' achievement leads me to the final implication: educational leaders should improve professional development to promote effective assessments of students' learning.

## **Educational Leaders Should Provide Differentiated Professional Development**

In light of the political push for educational reform over the past three decades, Fullan (2006) pondered, “Under what conditions will continuous improvement happen?” (p. 4) To create such an environment on the local level, the school’s administrative team should foster a supportive climate and culture in which differentiated professional development caters to the individual needs of each educator and maintains a commitment to continuous improvement—not only for each individual student, but also of each individual educator. At the national and local levels, educational leaders should support local efforts for differentiated professional development to ensure all schools are committed to continuous improvement per regulations and requirements for school and district accreditation.

In 2008, the British government invested £150 million (distributed over three years) to provide professional development for teachers in Assessment for Learning (Knight, 2008). Outlined in the school’s prospectus that is distributed to students and other stakeholders, Whitmoor College upheld the tenets of AfL in its assessment policy. In practice, educators had the option of taking professional development courses of their own choosing, based on specific, individualized needs identified by educators both independently and by supervisors. Some educators (such as those who sat on the school improvement team) received formal training on AfL and assisted other educators in implementing the tenets of AfL within their classrooms by providing informal opportunities for professional development.

Sewell (2008) promoted professional development through learning communities in which educators explored pedagogical practices on a standardized ELA curriculum. Comparatively, Greenbriar High School educators noted that the efficacy of the school’s



ELA PLCs had recently broken down to a lack of a unified goal and common understanding about the role and purpose of the PLC as a means of developing common best practices among educators and school leaders. At Whitmoor College, several educators referenced the positive influence of the school improvement team on promoting effective data interpretation in driving decision making within their classrooms. In this instance, Greenbriar could gain perspective on how to make informed decisions or predictions about students' learning using specific criteria, delineated through a common assessment developed during the PLC process. Meanwhile, Whitmoor College could gain perspective on how to translate the concept of implementing departmental PLCs as a part of its professional development offerings.

Furthermore, at Whitmoor College, after six successful years of teaching full-time within the classroom setting, educators had the option of meeting specific criteria demonstrated through professional development, classroom observations and evaluations, and samples of students' performance on school-wide targets to achieve a higher, merit-based salary schedule. Educational leaders at Whitmoor College anticipated educators' desires to improve their educational practices and offered relevant, differentiated professional development to meet individuals' needs.

At Greenbriar High School, educational leaders were launching a new evaluation program (Marzano) to provide individualized feedback on educators' performances within the classroom. In turn, these evaluations could not only provide a greater sense of accountability among teachers in their pedagogical and assessment practices, but also could suggest tailored professional development to enhance the school's ability to provide a cohesive system in which educators are striving to achieve a more cooperative educational organization.

## Summary

Systems that promote school improvement often rely on assessments of students' learning as accountability measures for performance and program evaluations of students, teachers, and schools. While both schools assessed students' learning on specific academic standards, both schools also noted they assess students' learning on other concepts including students' understanding of social and emotional awareness. Though educators in both North Dakota and Surrey, England did not perceive an imbalance in assessments of students' learning, the data suggests that such imbalances exist. The implications of this study suggest school systems such as that of the United States, England, or other countries (for example, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries) that rely on assessments to measure students' knowledge and abilities on standardized curricula (OECD, n.d.) need to recognize the purpose for the assessment and establish an assessment process that maintains students' holistic educational needs (whether academic or "pastoral") as a focus (ASCD, 2014). To promote a school climate and culture that fosters a comprehensive, balanced system of assessments of students' learning, educational leaders should: (a) create a unified goal for school improvement, (b) establish and oversee a comprehensive action plan, and (c) provide differentiated professional development. In so doing, perhaps students and educators will achieve their goals.

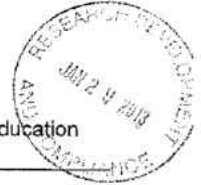
## **APPENDICES**

# Appendix A

## IRB Protocol

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### RESEARCH PROJECT REVIEW AND PROGRESS REPORT UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD



DATE 1/24/13 DEPARTMENT/COLLEGE Educational Leadership/College of Education and Human Development

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Kristin Garaas-Johnson, MFA

PROJECT TITLE Assessing Student Learning: An International Comparative Study

PROPOSAL NUMBER IRB-201203-334

IF MEDICAL COMPONENT, PLEASE GIVE PHYSICIAN'S NAME

<p><b>IRB USE ONLY</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> FULL BOARD REVIEW REQUIRED, EVEN THOUGH ORIGINAL APPROVAL WAS EXPEDITED</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CONTINUING APPROVAL, EXPEDITED CATEGORY <u>6-7</u></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEXT REVIEW REQUIRED BEFORE: <u>FEB 6 2014</u></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> CONTINUING APPROVAL, BASED ON FULL BOARD REVIEW</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> NEXT REVIEW REQUIRED BEFORE: _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> SUSPEND APPROVAL, PENDING INVESTIGATION</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> APPROVAL TERMINATED</p> <p>COMMENTS OF REVIEWER: _____</p> <p>Chair/Vice Chair/Member, IRB: <u>[Signature]</u></p> <p>cc: <u>Dr. Pauline Stonehouse</u> Approval Date: <u>2-7-13</u></p>
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1. Is project complete? Yes  No
2. Is project ongoing? Yes  No   
If No, explain below and indicate if continued approval and continuing review is desired.
3. How many subjects have been enrolled in the research project:  
16 since the date of last approval, and  
16 since the initial approval
4. Is the research permanently closed to the enrollment of new subjects? Yes  No   
Have all subjects completed all research-related interventions? Yes  No   
Does the research remain active only for long-term follow-up of subjects? Yes  No
5. Is data analysis complete? Yes  No

\*\*\* If the research is permanently closed to the enrollment of new subjects, all subjects have completed all research-related interventions, the research does not need to remain active for long-term follow-up of subjects, and all data analysis is complete, please sign here that you would like the IRB to terminate approval for this project, and finish filling out the rest of this form.

Please terminate IRB approval for this research project. \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator Date

6. Has any additional grant money been awarded for this project in the past year? Yes  No   
If yes, submit a copy of the grant along with this completed form.
7. Describe any adverse events and/or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others that have occurred since the last approval. If you did not report the adverse event or unanticipated problem previously, a separate Unanticipated Problem/Adverse Event Form must be submitted to RD&C with this form.  
There have not been any adverse events or unanticipated problems at this time.
8. Have any additional risks with this research been identified? Yes  No   
Describe all benefits experienced by participants, and include a current risk/benefit assessment based on study results.
9. Have there been any changes or deviations from the approved protocol since the most recent approval? Yes  No  If Yes, elaborate below, and submit a separate Protocol Change Form to the RD&C indicating proposed protocol changes.
- a. Have any of these changes been implemented already? Yes  No   
If yes, please describe fully.
- b. Are any protocol changes being planned for later implementation? Yes  No   
If yes, please describe fully. A separate Protocol Change Form must be submitted to RD&C for approval before the proposed protocol changes can be implemented.
10. Have any subjects withdrawn from the research? Yes  No   
If yes, state how many have withdrawn and describe the circumstances.

11. Have there been any complaints about the research since the last IRB review? Yes  No   
If yes, please report and summarize the complaints and your response/action.

12. Summarize any multi-site trial reports relevant to your research.  
Not applicable.

13. Summarize any recent literature, findings, or other information relevant to your research, especially information about risks associated with the research.  
There have been a number of recent changes in England regarding summative assessments since I conducted my interviews and observations there in June 2012 (*Guardian*, 2012). As my work is qualitative and emergent, I intend to include this information in my literature review and/or findings.

14. Have all PI's involved with the research completed the IRB Educational Requirements?  
Yes  No  (Educational requirements must be completed before the IRB can grant continued approval for the research project.)

15. On a separate piece of paper, provide a thorough protocol summary (approximately 300 words) giving a concise summary of the protocol's progress to date and the reasons for continuing the study or reasons for asking the IRB to terminate approval. The summary should include, for instance, an explanation of any complaints about the research, relevant multi-site trial reports, participant benefits, or a current risk-benefit assessment based on study results. Sufficient information is required in the summary so that the IRB can determine whether the proposed research continues to fulfill the criteria for approval.

16. A copy of the current informed consent document(s) (with the IRB Approval stamp), as well as a clean copy of the consent document(s) (with no IRB Approval stamp) must be submitted with this report.

17. Have there been any changes in the conflict of interest statement or situation for the Principal Investigators, research staff involved in the study, or each individual's respective family members in the last 12 months?  
Yes  No  If yes, please describe fully on a separate sheet of paper.

Signature of Principal Investigator  Date 1/24/13

Current email address: Kristin.garciajohnson@my.und.edu

Current Address: 2811 Cherry Street, Grand Forks, ND 58201

This completed form should be returned to the IRB, University of North Dakota, 264 Centennial Drive Stop 7134, Grand Forks, ND 58202-7134.

Since my IRB was approved, I conducted a study for my United States-based research at a public school district in North Dakota by interviewing and observing four teachers, one principal, and one curriculum director at a high school in North Dakota. Comparatively, I conducted a similar number of observations and interviews in Surrey, England. I observed and interviewed four year-10, A-level, or sixth form teachers (which translates to about the freshman to senior level in the United States, or 15 to 18 years old), a curriculum director, a headmaster, and a school improvement team.

To provide validity in my findings, as a traditional ethnographic approach, I immersed myself in the culture and climate of the district (Creswell, 2007). In addition to interviewing and observing teachers and principal/headmaster, curriculum director and/or school improvement team, I observed students outside of the classroom (in hallways before and after classes and in the commons area) to better understand teachers' and students perceptions of the educational setting. To ensure validity in my findings of teacher and administrator perceptions, I took extensive field notes and/or tape recorded my interviews, and time-stamped notes of my observations to better make sense of my ongoing fieldnotes.

I am in the process of structurally coding my interviews, observations, and fieldnotes (Saldana, 2011). Following the framework of Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis (2011), I structurally coded my data through horizontal analysis (Creswell, 2007) to reveal four themes, or domains, and I could break these larger codes down into categories, or taxonomies, upon deeper analysis (Saldana, 2011). To ensure validity as I review my research, I will continue to conduct member checks with my interviewees on the details of my observations to carefully construct my audit trail, tracking my findings and delineating pitfalls (Emerson, 1995).

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

Because of the diversity of respondents and the semi-structured nature of the interviews, it is impossible to outline all of the specific questions I will ask. Each respondent will be asked questions pertinent to their realm of knowledge or expertise, and my questions will evolve as I learn more and as I need to follow up on new directions. Nevertheless, I have noted some questions below that demonstrate the kinds of questions to be asked of participants.

- What is your role in the organization?
- Describe a typical day at work/school for you.
- What do you believe is the role of assessing student learning within your school system? What should it be?
- How do you know students have learned what they need to learn?
- How could schools improve the assessments?
- How frequently do you assess students' learning? What types of assessment do you use?
- What types of assessment are best in accurately determining what students have learned?
- What challenges do you have in assessing students' learning?
- Who decides what assessments students take?
- Do you believe assessments are necessary?
- Why do you use assessments?
- To whom do you report the results?
- What is your group doing to improve students' scores on assessments?



## Appendix C

### Consent to Participate in Research

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Assessing Student Learning: A Comparative Study

Study Investigator: Kristin Garaas-Johnson, MFA

#### INVITATION

You are invited to participate in research examining the role of assessing students' learning. You are invited because you may have opinions or knowledge about this issue. Your participation is voluntary. Between 12 and 20 people will take part in this study.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study seeks to find out the role of the role of assessing students' learning within school systems, how assessments are written and implemented, and how assessments measure students' learning. The researcher will use this information to write scholarly articles about the tense debates over the role of assessing students' learning within school systems.

#### WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed about your knowledge, experiences, or opinions on student assessments. These interviews typically last thirty (30) minutes to an hour. You also will be observed in the educational setting (e.g. classroom) for roughly one to two hours. Your participation may last up to three hours in total, but this varies.

You will be asked if video images, photographs, or voice recordings can be made of your interview or educational setting. Such recordings will be used only for writing down exactly what you say. Your name will remain secret. Tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet after use. Being recorded is voluntary. You may still participate without being recorded.

#### WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

Information learned from this study will be used in scientific journal articles, in presentations, or to train teachers, service providers, or other researchers. None of these will identify you personally. You will be referred to by a made up name instead. Interviews, notes, and any video or audio recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet when not in use. Any information from the data that could identify you will be removed. A paid typist may transcribe any recordings; this person has signed a confidentiality agreement.

#### ARE THERE ANY RISKS?

The risks involved with this study include the possibility of loss of confidentiality. Though I take many steps to ensure secrecy, the identity of participants might accidentally become known. This may cause embarrassment or discomfort. Some questions I ask about your experiences and opinions might cause worry, embarrassment, discomfort, or sadness. You may choose not to answer such questions. There is a remote possibility that participants (or organizations) may experience financial, legal, or reputation risks if the research reveals unflattering or damaging information about their organization or practices (i.e. participants are not accurately following assessment protocol or do not have proper skills to assess students' learning). Referrals to counseling will be available should you experience bad feelings, but no money is available from the study to pay for such services. Another drawback for you might include the amount of time spent in interviews or answering questionnaires.

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University of North Dakota  
Research Development & Compliance

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS?**

No direct benefit is guaranteed to you from participating in this study. Your participation in this research, however, may benefit you or other people in the future by helping us learn how educational standards are developed and implemented in schools and communities.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?**

No participants will receive pay for taking part in the study.

**IF I DECIDE TO START THE STUDY, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND?**

Your decision to participate in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you do decide to take part, you may change your mind at any time without penalty or loss of benefits that you had before the study. Your decision to participate or not in this study will not affect any relationship you might have with employers or service providers. You may choose not to participate in certain interviews or surveys, and you can skip any questions you do not want to answer.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

If you have questions about this research in the future, please contact the researcher, Kristin Garaas-Johnson, at (701) 541-3806 or by E-mail ([kristin.garaasjohnso@my.und.edu](mailto:kristin.garaasjohnso@my.und.edu)). This research is being supervised by Dr. Pauline Stonehouse, Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota. You may contact Dr. Stonehouse at 701-777-4163 or [Pauline.stonehouse@und.edu](mailto:Pauline.stonehouse@und.edu) with any questions about this research.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or if you wish to talk with someone else.

**Authorization to participate in the research study:**

I have read the information in this consent form, had any questions answered, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator or Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**IRB APPROVED**

MAR 27 2012

University of North Dakota  
Research Development & Compliance

## Appendix C

### North Dakota Sample Codes

North Dakota Codes	Examples
What	<i>Valerie Smallbeck</i> : “What’s the most important task for you today?” <i>Student</i> : “Listening.”
Why	<i>Student</i> : “Can I pass this class?” <i>Valerie Smallbeck</i> : “Do you want to pass this class?”
How	<i>Susan Jones</i> : “What was the other myth about Arthur’s enduring? Any other questions on Tennyson? Remember the test on King A. is Thursday of next week.”
For Whom	<i>Valerie Smallbeck</i> : “So five, five, and five—explain why it was important to you.”
Common Assessments	<i>Gene Smiley</i> : “Thirteen years ago now, the common assessments that we had were based on short snippets from an article or a short story, but now some are wanting to go to now after they read this novel, this is what we want to evaluate them on. And writing based on this.”
Common Core	<i>Kurt Brown</i> : “We want to move away from page 1 to page 256 by the end of the year. We want to [long pause] we want to define what it is we want kids to know and to be able to do.”
Accountability	<i>Kurt Brown</i> : “So you want no fidelity, you want no accountability, you just want a system in place and we get the same old, same old.”
Systematized	<i>Kurt Brown</i> : “And it really was not until the advent of our department in our 09-10 year that we started to look at what needed to be systematized. There were a hundred of things that needed to be systematized and everything was a priority. What do we pick first?”
Response to Intervention	<i>Kurt Brown</i> : “If you do not have PLCs formalized, you can’t do RTI effectively. So here’s what our secondary folks are doing. They’re leap-frogging over “what should our students know and be able to do” to creating an intervention when kids fail when they haven’t even agreed upon what they should know and be able to do.”
Professional Development	<i>Jared White</i> : “We’ve done some things over the years where the consortium would have a professional development with [county schools] and there would be breakout sessions, but it’s been less the last couple of years.”
Professional Learning Community	<i>Gene Smiley</i> : “We spent an hour and a half in the district office, and there were four or five freshman teachers, and four or five sophomore teachers, each hour and a half block. And we went in, and we all said, OK, this is what we think is important, and the ‘four’ would be this, and the ‘three’ would be this, and we were able to weigh in.”
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learning	<i>Jared White</i> : “It has to be 21 <sup>st</sup> century learning, it has to be collaborative, creative, critical thinking, and you know all of those things that we want as a part of 21 <sup>st</sup> century learning.”
Focus	<i>Valerie Smallbeck</i> : “Well, the school read the focus book by Schmoker, who said that you need to go back to read, write, speak.”

## Surrey, England Sample Codes

Surrey Codes	Examples
What	<i>Amy O'Shane:</i> "It plays into stereotypes in gender stereotyping and authority. Gender and femininity and homosexuality are not perceived as good leaders because they have a tendency to be needing help and incapable of doing those leadership activities."
Why	<i>Jackson Hughes:</i> "One of the reasons we do that is partly because we are under pressure to maintain not just the A* to C rates, but the percentage of students that achieve A*s. We're not based simply on the proportion of students that pass above a C grade. They also are expected to make three levels of progress between primary school and the end of key stage four."
How	<i>Jackson Hughes:</i> "Time in the class to practice the behavior. Start with the wind and back it up with the root, or vice versa. Begin with a mind map, write paragraph and peer asses. Give them the mark criteria—could be homework, and determine where they think their work lands. Do this over a couple of lessons and they may plan their whole piece and they can bring that information into the test."
For Whom	<i>Jackson Hughes:</i> "We're trying to make students more independent, more reflexive learners."
Accountability	<i>Yvonne Stoller:</i> "So because of the accredited provider that we have here to train teachers, and because we were a training school, and now a teaching school where we open our doors and share our materials and supports with other schools as well, we are very lucky. We have a large number of staff who work together to develop personnel."
Differentiation	<i>Jackson Hughes:</i> "So [the question] would be what are some of the thoughts and feelings the writer has about—as he expresses them. That would be more analytical. Now on that section, technical accuracy is not judged. On the writing section it is judged. So for that student that we are talking about she would be penalized for her special educational need, and it limits her in that capacity. It doesn't in the reading capacity. Yes, she is exam accommodated to some extent, but not in every area."
System Performance Management	<i>Yvonne Stoller:</i> "We have a large number of staff who work together to develop personnel. We produce a staffing report every year, which I take to the governors of the school, which pretty much tells the story of what happened and the key things of what happened. It reports out about performance management, it reports about the responsibilities of people and what they've done, it includes our advanced skills teachers and what they've done, it includes the training of our teachers and what they have done, and it includes summary documents."
School Development Plan	<i>Deputy Head of School:</i> "The school has a school development plan—has anyone mentioned the school development plan to you? It's the vision for the school. It's what's right for us and it's what moves us forward."
Professional Development	<i>Jim Ohman:</i> "Some people who are doing additional qualifications, like leadership pathway, they might be doing the national qualifications, or preparation for headship . . . The government—they have produced new professional standards because they want this level of rigor. . ."
Ofsted	<i>Jim Ohman:</i> Ofsted has moved their focus from looking at all the school data and just the results to actually looking at what happens in the classroom . . . rather than just looking at those figures in a document at the end of year."

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