CHAPTER

1

EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Diverse Students and Learning Challenges

Advice to the U.S. President from Education Leaders

Our president has to look at how we are going to bring our school system into the 21st century. . . . We have been operating the most unequal educational system in the industrialized world, with dramatically different resources available to different students. At this point in the knowledge economy, what kids need to be able to do is to frame and solve their own problems, find and manage information, organize themselves in teams, and—with collaboration—tackle novel issues. We need to focus our curriculum on standards that evaluate how people can think and problem solve and invent and create and use knowledge in new ways and continue to learn independently. That means we have to change the assessments that we use. Most countries in the world that are high achieving have assessments that ask students to think and problem solve and investigate and conduct research. We are still having our kids bubble-in multiple-choice tests, which focus on recall and recognition rather than on these higher order thinking skills.

Linda Darling-Hammond

Are the 21st-century learning environments that educational leaders call schools designed to reveal and teach to the abilities of the learners they serve? Several critical questions, as Linda Darling-Hammond suggests, plague U.S. educators as they strive to develop programs and policies that reach and teach every child:

- How do we educate today's diverse population of adolescents to become tomorrow's global citizens?
- How can research on learning and teaching help update educational assessment policies and practices?
- How do we comprehensively assess what these individuals now know and will need to know?
- How do we "differentiate" assessment to address diverse learning abilities?
- How does differentiated assessment lead to differentiated instruction that will enable schools truly to leave no child behind?

These are the essential questions that guide this book, *Differentiated Assessment: How to Assess the Learning Potential of Every Student.* If we ask these questions in New York City, we may find that differentiated assessment is alive and well in today's classrooms but still rarely acknowledged as the judgment that counts. In the New York public schools, as in most U.S. schools, test scores rather than classroom work determine whether students make the grade (Harris Stefanakis, 1998b). In other words, students' test scores—not the body of work they compile at school over the years—is what counts.

Because of current testing policies, we *are* leaving children behind, including many who are potentially gifted or are English language learners or have special educational needs. Are we failing our students because we are not recognizing their abilities? Are we relying on one type of test to determine all individuals' futures, rather than on multiple assessments that reflect the diversity of the human mind? As a policymaker and educator, it saddens me to report what I have observed. Simply put, we are failing our students by using obsolete assessments that inaccurately and inadequately measure their abilities. In fact, I often doubt that students' learning abilities, those of adolescents in particular, are visible to those who teach them or to those who would presume to judge whether they are "intelligent." Therefore, in this book I will focus particularly on adolescent learners, including those who may be labeled gifted, learning disabled, or English language learners, all of whom present specific learning challenges.

The following example is from a true story that appeared on the *New York Times* op-ed page.

NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED: FAILING OUR STUDENTS!

By Evangeline Harris Stefanakis, Op-Ed Contributor

January 8, 2006

Beginning this week, New York City's fourth graders will take the state's standardized tests in reading and writing. Many people are looking forward to a repeat of last year, when the city celebrated a nearly 10 percent increase in fourth-grade reading scores. But not everyone is sharing in the anticipation.

Luis Castro, a 12-year-old from the Dominican Republic, is worried that he will not pass the test and thus be forced to repeat the fourth grade, again. Like so many over-age immigrant students at the school he attends on the Lower East Side, Luis is as tall as most seventh graders, has an incipient mustache, and is tired of being teased. Worse, he's afraid of disappointing his parents, who, like so many other immigrants, have pinned their hopes on their children.

New York City schools base their decision on whether to promote students entirely on results from the state achievement exams. But these tests, which are written for native English speakers, discriminate against those who are still learning the language.

Luis is a perfect case in point. His schoolwork shows that he has made significant progress since September and that he has met state standards in the work he has completed. But when Luis takes state tests, he is unable to quickly comprehend what he reads in English, and that hurts his performance . . . and his score.

Today, this is the judgment that counts, but the impact of this policy is hurting large numbers of intelligent children.

Even by conservative estimates, immigrant children like Luis account for close to half the student population in public schools across New York State. The same is true in many urban environments across the U.S. and internationally.

Doing well isn't simply a matter of knowing English. Standardized tests measure children's knowledge of ''cognitive academic language,'' or the language of a highly literate population. Students in middle-class areas like the Upper East Side, the Upper West Side, Park Slope, and Riverdale are well versed in this language.

But students in Washington Heights, Corona, East Brooklyn, and other low-income, immigrant communities do not read, write, or speak [English] fluently. In most cases, neither their parents nor other adults they come in contact with speak this language to them, and yet, they are required to learn it to pass state tests and be promoted. Their test scores reflect the fact that they often must literally translate as they work, either from their native language to English, or from the version of English they speak in their minority community to cognitive academic English.

What is needed is ''differentiated assessment'' that looks at the learner's abilities in the context of a collection of evidence that provides information on what that child knows and is able to do. What does this mean in practice in the daily learning environment?

The solution to this problem, already used by many schools and districts in other parts of the country, is to use a student's body of work, or portfolio, as an additional means of assessment. Where standardized tests alone reveal only the language differences of students, a growing body of research shows that a combination of formal tests and informal assessments can indicate their progress. Portfolios, in particular, capture both the process and products of students' learning and reflect their multiple languages, multiple intelligences, and multiple abilities.

Perhaps even more important, an approach that includes portfolios would not only improve assessments of immigrant students, but would also help ensure that they receive a good education. Portfolios reveal what is being taught and help to ensure that teachers regularly observe and document the learning of each student.

Skeptics may ask, couldn't schools, under pressure to show progress, simply rubber-stamp portfolios regardless of quality? No, because, just as with statewide tests, there are clear, codified standards for judging portfolios. In math, for example, young children must demonstrate counting, numeration, and data-analysis skills.

But couldn't teachers or parents polish up a child's portfolio to make it look more impressive than it really is? That's probably true, just as it's true for any homework assignment, but the student would still be required to take standardized tests, which would reveal any discrepancies.

Differentiated assessment practices are growing nationally in the U.S.

Georgia, Hawaii, Tennessee, and Virginia have been among the leaders in adopting standards-based testing programs using portfolios and alternative assessments for bilingual students and those with limited English proficiency. Even though the state achievement tests are scheduled for this week, it's not too late for New York City schools to follow the lead of these states. In making their promotion decisions, individual schools can elect to use portfolios and other assessments to determine the fate of any child.

Researchers and the courts have repeatedly found that exclusively using any single assessment tool to determine the promotion or graduation of bilingual students is discriminatory. Until New York State creates a collection of formal tests and informal assessments that are truly comprehensive, ZIP codes, family income, and socioeconomic status will continue to be strong indicators of graduation and promotion rates. New York should stop sorting students along these lines and create a comprehensive system—a differentiated assessment system—that measures and celebrates the diversity of what all students know and can do.

The students' portfolios in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, on the DVD provided with this book, show the quality of the work that two students who were failing in school were able to do.

Exhibit 1.1. Purposes of Assessment

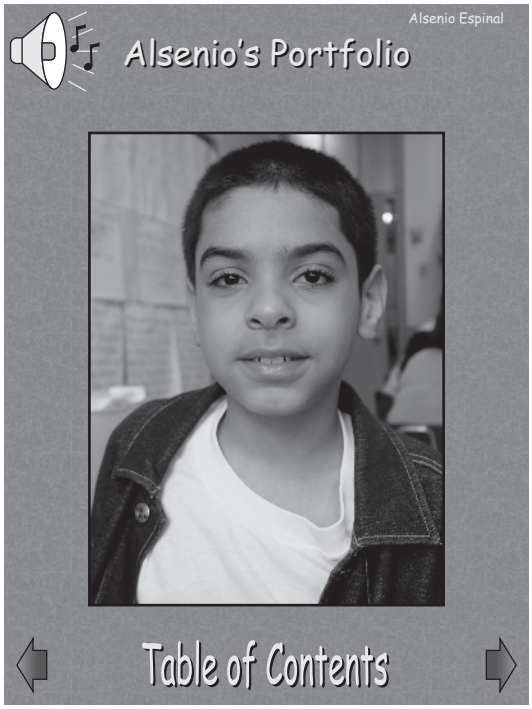
Improving Student Learning

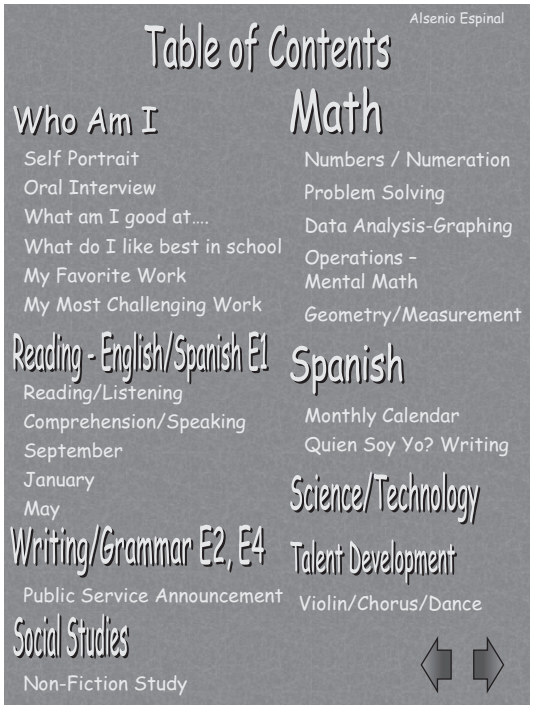
- Making learning visible to students
- Fostering reflective learning and self-regulating
- Acknowledging and celebrating learning
- Communicating learning to families and the community

Improving Teaching

- Adjusting instruction
- Fostering reflective teaching to inform practice
- Acknowledging and celebrating teaching
- Improving the capacity of schools to reach for high standards for student achievement

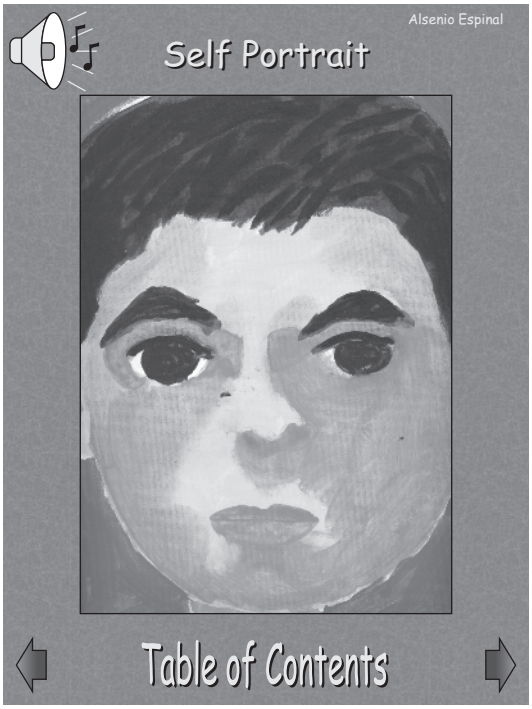
Figure 1.1. Alsenio's Portfolio





Note: The complete version is on the DVD.

Figure 1.1. (*continued*)



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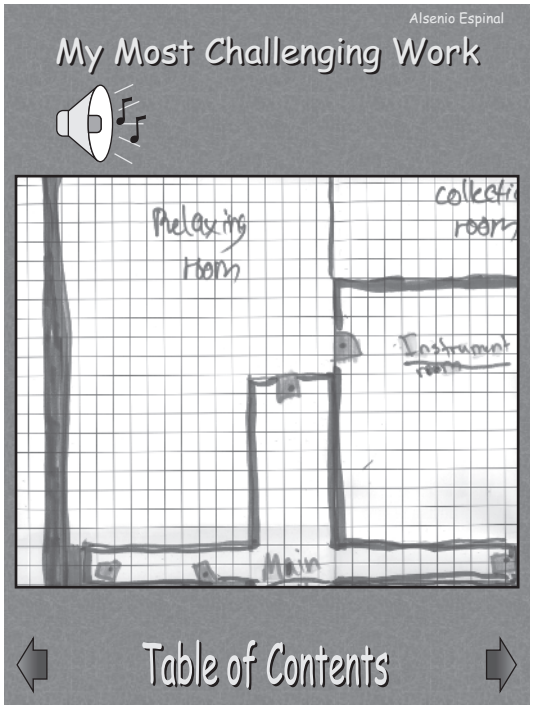

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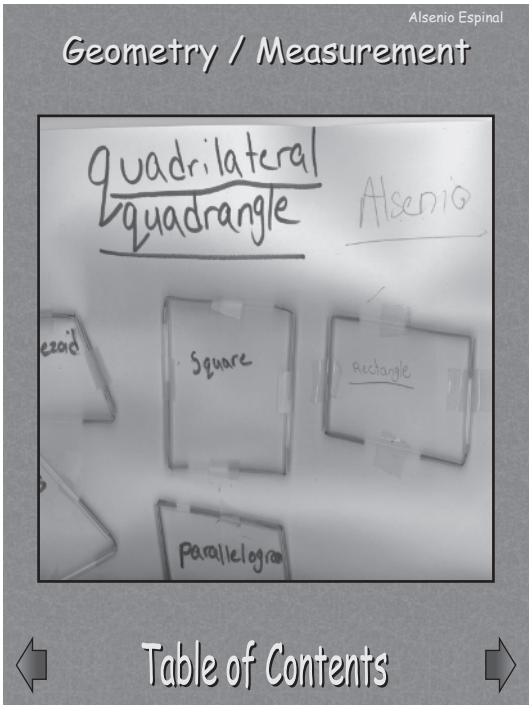

Figure 1.2. Danny's Portfolio

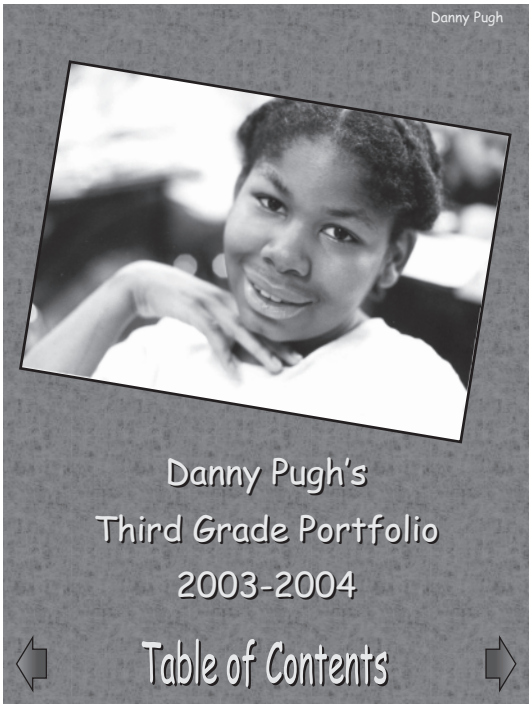

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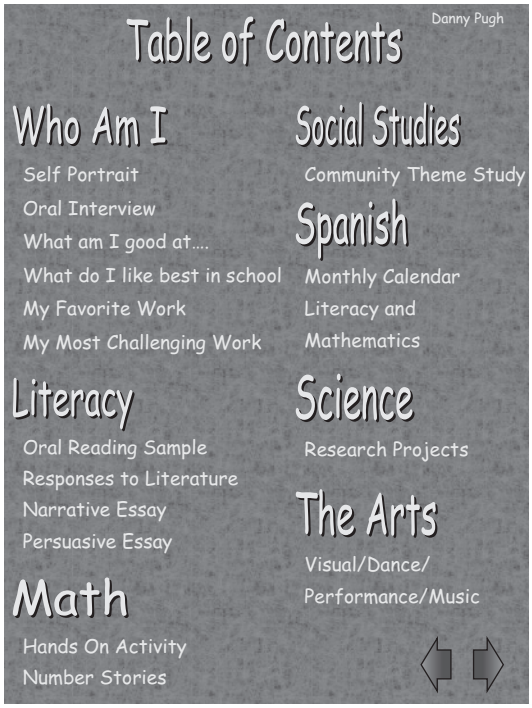
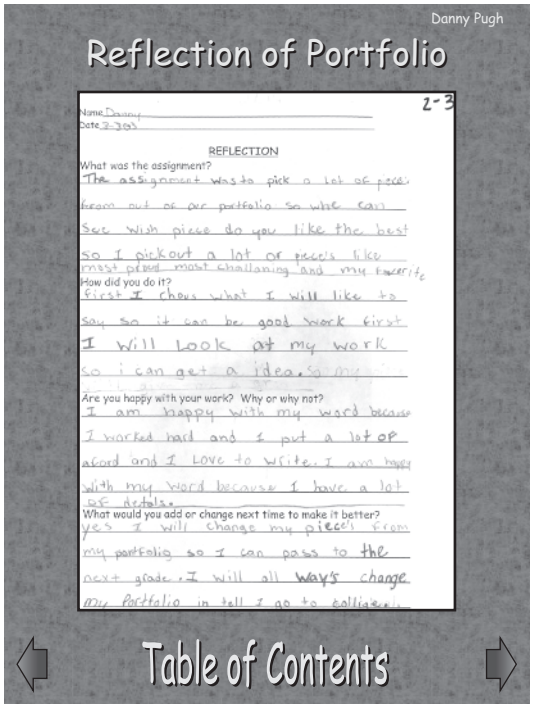
Figure 1.2. (*continued*)





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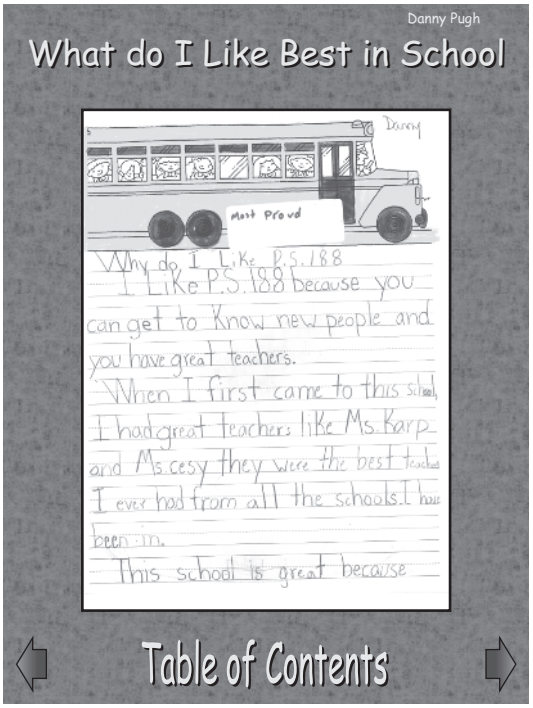

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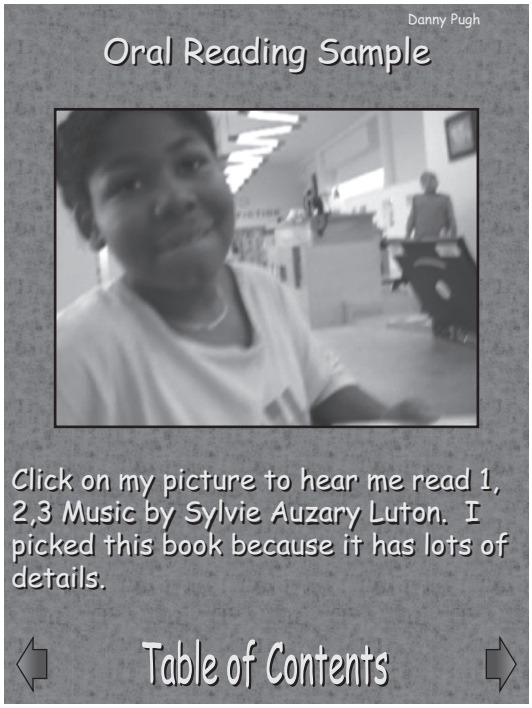
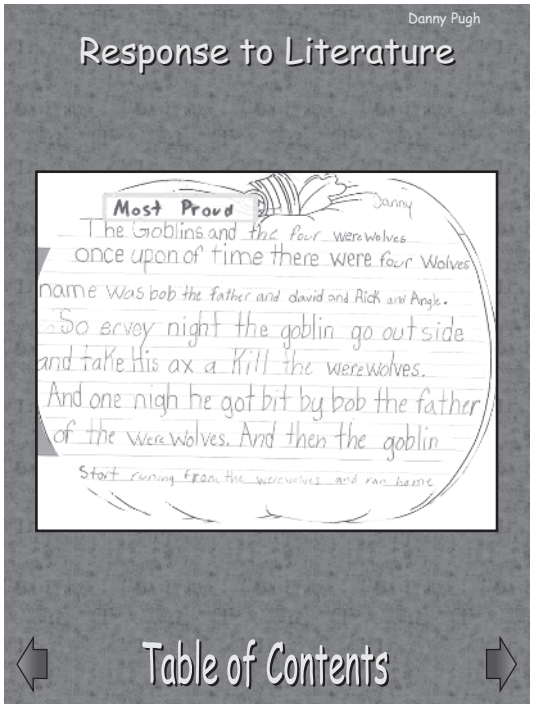




ADDRESSING THE LANDSCAPE OF ASSESSMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICE

Who are our learners? Some more examples are given in Figures 1.3 and 1.4. Are we recognizing their abilities in order to help them grow? Luis, the boy mentioned in the *New York Times* article, is not an isolated example. Current statistics from New York City's Office of Immigration show that one in five public school students is either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. Other school systems across the United States have similar demographics, and government at all levels must establish new education policies that make it possible to provide a fair and equal education to all children.

Recent U.S. demographics indicate that the diversity of learners and the learning challenges they bring with them are astonishing. Amid this increasingly diverse student population, coupled with mandates to teach every child to high standards, education policies offer a confusing landscape. A constellation of

Recent U.S. demographics indicate that the diversity of learners and the learning challenges they bring with them are astonishing.

Figure 1.3. Who Are Our Learners? Jesus, Paz, Joyce, and Troy

Figure 1.4. From One Student's Portfolio: ''Where I Am Coming From''

policies, including the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, all require that students who have diverse abilities, cultural differences, language differences, and learning challenges score well enough on the same standardized tests to pass grade eight, enter high school, and go on to graduate. Alternative programs for students who speak no English or have disabilities also require testing, which again may not be appropriate for students who have language issues and/or learning disabilities.

STANDARDIZED TESTING AS LANGUAGE POLICY

Kate Menken (2008) explains that the ideal behind standardized testing to measure academic achievement has translated to language policy: ''An immediate effect of NCLB test policy is that English language learners are overwhelmingly failing the tests, labeled as deficient and low performing, and barred from educational advancement'' (p. 35).

The current constellation of education policies is sending public schools confusing messages about whether to focus on adequate yearly progress as evaluated by test scores or to personalize teaching for individual students, many of whom are English language learners or have disabilities. As school leaders struggle to interpret these policies, large numbers of children in the nation's 21st-century classrooms are failing. So what can educators do?

The answer is simple. Education in the 21st century requires classrooms that can personalize how we assess and teach all learners. We need educators who are equipped with classroom practices that include both the differentiated assessments and the instructional skills to help them know more about each learner's abilities in languages, the arts, math, science, social skills, athletics, and other areas in order to capitalize on students' strengths as a catalyst for learning. The call for differentiated instruction has been resounding for some time in schools across the U.S., but the first step in implementing this model is "to know the learners" through varied assessment formats and by using multiple ways of gathering data on individual differences. Figure 1.5 suggests that, in order to use assessment data more effectively to support the learning of students and their teachers, we need to create not a single set of tests but a comprehensive differentiated assessment system.

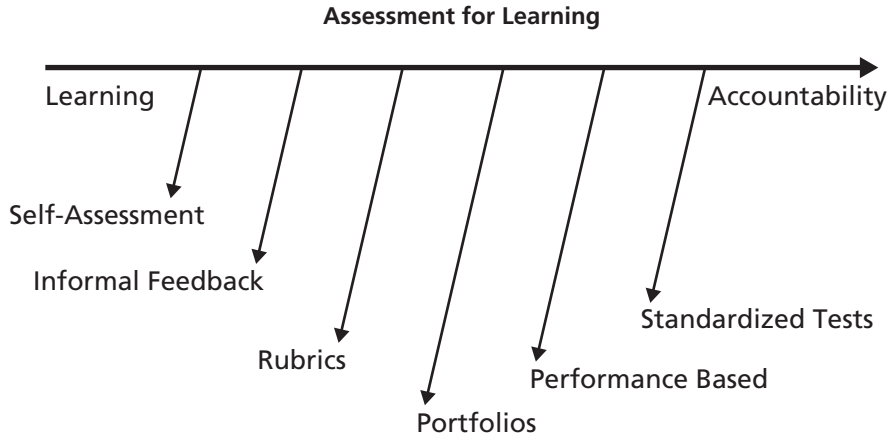
Education in the 21st century requires classrooms that can personalize how we assess and teach all learners.

The remainder of this book offers ways to create such an assessment system for adolescent students in middle and high schools so that educators and community members can begin to see the learners' abilities, not their disabilities, when dealing with the challenges these students present in today's classrooms. (See Figure 1.5.)

TO SUM UP

At this time in the United States, test scores, rather than classroom work, determine whether students move on to the next grade. Students from diverse backgrounds, many of them recent immigrants whose first language is not English, are often left behind because of our existing standards. These students, including those who are potentially gifted, deserve a chance to show what they can do. Most would agree that differentiated instruction is needed to help all students learn information and skills to help them solve problems in the real world. It follows that we use differentiated assessments also.

Figure 1.5.



The standards we now use to evaluate these students and promote them to the next educational level are not working or relevant. A major educational priority should be to change the standardized tests we've been using for decades, which are exclusionary and keep students who know the material but are not native English speakers from being promoted. They struggle to finish the tests, translating as they go. When they have not finished within the time limit or don't understand, they are held back. Many fail a second time and tend to give up and drop out; as a consequence, their potential is not realized, and the knowledge and talents they have to offer are lost to the rest of society.

We can make our school systems relevant for students in this century by:

- Making learning meaningful to students
- Fostering reflective learning in students
- Communicating learning goals to families and the community
- Improving the capacity of schools to assess student achievement
- Changing the way our teachers view achievement

¿? DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways are school systems today failing students?
2. What do today's adolescents require from the education system in order to contribute to our global society?
3. Which of our educational policies and practices seem outdated?
4. How can we determine what students really need to know?
5. In what ways can our current assessment methods be updated?
6. What is differentiated assessment all about?
7. How does differentiated instruction work?
8. In what better ways can we assess what students know before deciding whether to promote them?
9. How can we go about making changes in the existing system?