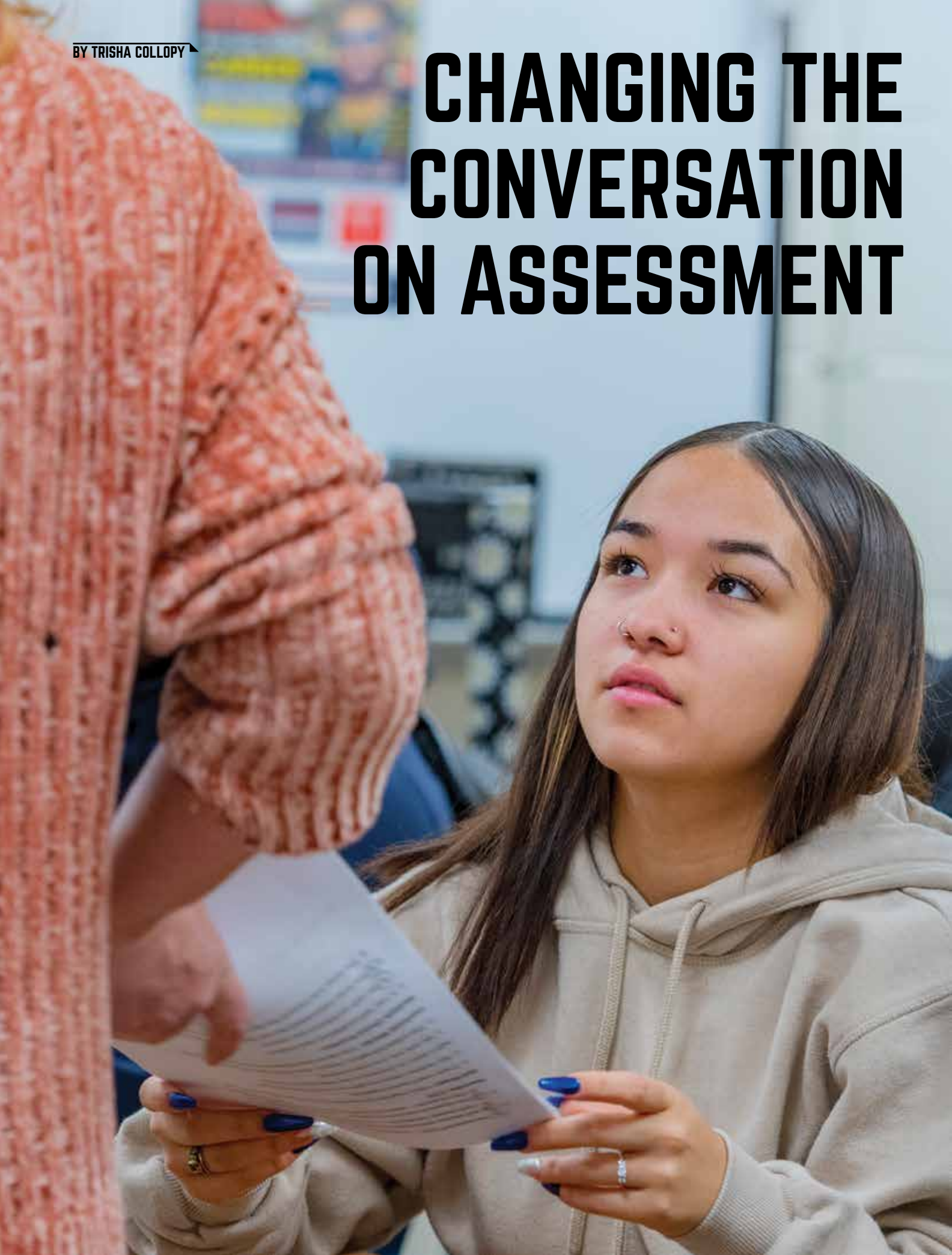
BY TRISHA COLLOPY

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ON ASSESSMENT



How Classroom Protocols and Better Family Engagement Can **Help Teachers Reimagine Assessment** from the Inside Out

Kathryn Mitchell Pierce has seen a shift in parent-teacher conferences at many schools she works with in Missouri.

Conversations that had once been about student learning or classroom experiences have turned into sessions explaining how to interpret standardized test scores and benchmark testing results.

When area schools began offering "Testing 101" classes for parents—to help them better interpret the data—she knew something had broken down.

"To participate in parent conferences about test scores, parents had to become experts in educational assessment," she says. "That was getting really far away from kids and their work. That was getting really far away from their areas of expertise as parents."

In their new book, *Going Public with Assessment: A Community Practice Approach*, Pierce and her coauthor, **Rosario Ordoñez-Jasis**, aim to return the conversation on assessment to the classroom—to the work that teachers do every day to assess and support student learning.

They argue that teachers already have the tools to successfully evaluate students and their literacy skills, but they don't always have the language or the opportunity to communicate classroom assessment information to those outside their classroom.

"Too often, we go into our classroom, close our doors, and we're by ourselves with our kids for most of the day," says Ordoñez-Jasis, chair of the literacy and reading faculty at California State University, Fullerton.

"We need to break that isolation, to be open and honest with ourselves and others about what we're assessing, how we're assessing students."

When teachers can "go public" with the work they're doing inside the classroom, it can open up community-wide conversations on learning, curriculum, and whole school change, both authors say.

OPENING THE CLASSROOM DOORS

At the heart of the book is a series of structured ways to open up honest conversations—between teachers and their colleagues and between teachers and families.

Pierce, an assistant professor at Saint Louis University, says "generative and challenging conversations" between teachers are "key to changing the nature of classroom practice."

But opening classroom doors and inviting scrutiny to the work they do every day is a vulnerable position for many teachers, she says.

"It's scary any time you're opening up your classroom to other people," she says, "because that hasn't been a common practice. If I'm bringing samples of student work from my classroom, there's a sense that I'm being judged against the samples you're bringing."

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The book highlights two models for teacher-to-teacher conversations: professional learning communities (PLCs) and instructional rounds.

PLCs aren't new, but Pierce says they can be most effective when they're teacher-driven and have a structure that keeps the conversation focused on questions of practice.

Important principles include having teachers meet regularly, giving them control over the agenda, and keeping conversations focused on samples of student work.

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Two key perspectives, supported by the IRA-NCTE Standards for Assessment of Reading and Writing, which authors Pierce and Ordoñez-Jasis say are the focus throughout their book

1. **Teachers are at the heart of asessment because they are integrally involved in what students are doing each day.** Their day-to-day experiences with students provide teachers with a unique perspective on teaching and learning. This perspective is essential in all conversations about assessing student learning.

2. **Teachers grow stronger, and smarter, in their assessment work when they collaborate with others.** Whether working with other teachers, or with family and community members, teachers develop their own understandings and contribute to essential assessment conversations that change the ways we all view and practice assessment.

—*Going Public with Assessment: A Community Practice Approach*, introduction

In instructional rounds, teachers observe one another in class and have a structured conversation afterward about evidence of student learning in the classroom and ideas about ways to enhance learning.

In this case as well, the conversation is focused less on a critique of an individual teacher's classroom practice than on "what the observing teachers were taking away that they could inform their own practice," Pierce says.

As a facilitator, Pierce says she tries to focus the group on an inquiry-based approach, working from a place of genuine curiosity about student learning that can stimulate teachers to reflect on their practice, rather than to critique individual teachers.

At one school she worked with, a first-grade teacher was grading student first drafts writing samples based on spelling. As the teacher talked over her classroom practices and beliefs with others, she realized her assessment practices were focused more on conventions than on exploring ideas through writing.

"She initially thought all student writing should be focused on correct writing, and it has to be spelled correctly from the minute the pencil hits the paper. Over time, she realized if she focused exclusively on conventions, she wouldn't be helping kids develop ideas in their writing. And she realized she values that, but her assessment practices weren't helping kids focus on ideas," Pierce says.

> [The first-grade teacher] didn't have this instant aha moment. But she made really deep changes in the way she was approaching her work. That's an amazing thing for an experienced teacher to do.
>
> —*Kathryn Mitchell Pierce*

The teachers' conversations about samples of student work allowed her to listen in and see that her peers were using different perspectives in their assessment of student writing—and that's what eventually led her to change her practices.

"She didn't have this instant aha moment," Pierce says. "But she made really deep changes in the way she was approaching her work. That's an amazing thing for an experienced teacher to do. That's a very vulnerable place for a teacher to be in."

INVITING FAMILIES INTO THE CONVERSATION

Just as teachers can learn through collaborative conversations with peers, they can learn through similar conversation with the families they serve.

Ordoñez-Jasis says that's especially important with families of emergent bilingual students, who may have many language strengths at home that are invisible in a testing-based classroom model.

Ordoñez-Jasis says she had an eye-opening moment early in her career as a classroom teacher.

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CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT
LITERACY ASSESSMENT

When talking to colleagues, families, students, or community members...

EXPLAIN all of the ways we learn about students other than through standardized tests.

EMPHASIZE formative, thoughtful, and responsive assessment practices.

SHARE observations and describe what students can do.

ENCOURAGE reflection on learning processes, progress, and goals.

LISTEN to multiple perspectives on student learning.

CLARIFY how test scores or assessment policies are used at the classroom, school, and district levels.

IDENTIFY ways that others can contribute to decision making about assessment.

HONOR the unique perspectives that students and their families bring to the assessment process.

INVITE the broader school community to engage with authentic demonstrations of student learning.

USE resources and research to frame conversations about literacy assessment.

Formative Assessment That Truly Informs Instruction
www.ncte.org/positions/statement/formative-assessment

Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing
www.ncte.org/positions/statement/standardsassessmentstandards

Machine Scoring Fails the Test
www.ncte.org/positions/statement/machine_scoring

NCTE Blogs about Assessment
bit.ly/AssessmentBlogs

NCTE

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The principal at her Bay Area school invited teachers to do a walkthrough of the neighborhood with him so teachers could get to know the community.

But the teachers had little time to absorb what they were taking in from that experience or discuss ways to use what they learned in their classroom practice.

"It wasn't until I went back to grad school that I realized I wasn't reaching all families," she says. "I was in a diverse neighborhood, I had 13 languages in my classroom. But I was failing, I wasn't connecting to them."

Teachers today are gathering more data than ever on students through practices such as community mapping, home visits, family interviews and surveys.

"But they don't always know what they want to do with it," Ordoñez-Jasis says. "They need to then ask, 'How is this going to inform our practice?' "

A key, she says, is opening a genuine, two-way conversation that invites families to be part of the process—as advocates for their children and as equal partners who have funds of knowledge that teachers can build on in the classroom.

One school she worked with in Southern California organized a Café Literario (Literacy Café), which invited parents to have roundtable conversations around literacy and assessment.

Students helped organize the event, which included a mariachi band and videographer. More important was the Spanish-dominant setting, which allowed parents to open up about their challenges parenting adolescents, and their questions about their children's education.

Parents who were initially hesitant to attend found that the face-to-face conversations allowed them to connect over the push-pull they experienced with their adolescent children.

"My mom has a lot to say, she just can't say it in English," one student later reported.

"The fact that she was there, able to use her primary language, was very impactful. He was saying, my mother can advocate for me, can be here and participate, if space is opened up for her to do so," Ordoñez-Jasis says.

The structured event helped shift relationships between families and the school. It can also feed back into the work teachers do in the classroom, she says.

"When teachers are able to have these extended conversations with families, they can learn about assets, the resources children bring with them into the classroom, and they can use it as a starting point for developing curriculum and assessments that get at their needs, but also their strengths," she says.

SHIFTING THE CONVERSATION

Both authors says they hope their book encourages administrators and schools to set aside and protect time for teachers to have conversations around assessment with one another, and with families.

"High-stakes testing is definitely not capturing all of what students know and are doing on a daily basis in the classroom and even the group dynamics that occur around literacy," Ordoñez-Jasis says.

"It's critical for teachers to be able to come together with one another and with families to have these conversations, to explore ways of bridging home and school literacies, and to design assessment practices that honor the literacy goals and values of home and school," Pierce says.

"We're really teasing out and making visible our values and beliefs that are driving our practice," she says. "That's the point where we can make lasting changes."

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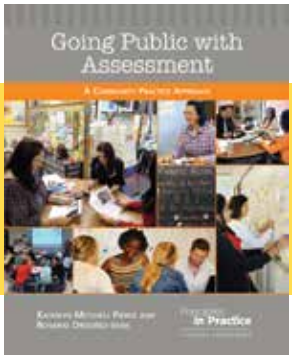

Authors Kathryn Mitchell Pierce and Rosario Ordoñez-Jasis aim to return the conversation on assessment to the classroom—to the work that teachers do every day to measure and nudge students to grow.

To read a sample chapter or order this book, visit **http://bit.ly/NCTE_GoingPublic**