

Advancing Academic Literacy Through Teachers' Assessments

To achieve literacy for all students, we must make use of the wealth of assessment data teachers themselves can provide about their students.

Adding systematic teacher judgments to the public record could well serve the wide variety of audiences interested in the progress of students and the effectiveness of school programs. Increased use of teachers' assessments could change public discussion about the goals of schooling. Integration of teachers' assessments into higher-level decisions could redirect instruction to address the critical components of literacy for all students.

We expect two distinct reactions from our readers. Some will ask, "Doesn't teacher assessment of student achievement play an important role today?" Our answer is "no." Teachers judge the social and emotional responses of students, but not their achievement (Fraatz 1987). Reading instruction, for instance, is driven by batteries of externally mandated tests, while writing instruction is still not a significant curriculum domain for many students.

Other readers will ask, "How can we trust the regular classroom teacher with the complex task of judging student performance?" Our answer has two parts. First, we must. Teachers already make a variety of decisions every day that influence student

achievement. They decide on group placement; they choose the rate at which new content is introduced to different groups; they grade students on daily, quarterly, and yearly accomplishments. The second part of our answer is that we must improve the conceptual and procedural foundations for assessment. Today's teachers are provided little basis for a professional approach to this task; this situation must be remedied if teachers are to promote high levels of literacy in their students.

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How Effective Teachers Use Assessment

The assessment practices of effective teachers are closely interwoven with instructional decisions (Calfée et al. 1988). When these teachers are asked about a student's comprehension strategies, for example, they talk in specific terms about the student's ability to infer characters' motives or to connect the plots of different novels. They call on a wealth of observations stored in their memories and on rich documentation of their students' writing performances. Some teachers keep checklists; more rely on portfolios containing samples of student work along with their own comments and interpretations. Where literature is the basis for the reading program, students keep data on books they have read, including their personal reactions, summaries of key themes, and new vocabulary. These teachers can explain in detail how this information serves them in planning instruction—for the class as a whole, as well as in guiding individual students.

Such assessment practices contrast sharply with prevailing routines in most classrooms. Criterion-referenced instruments, typically embedded in textbook materials, often serve to guide instruction. In some schools, the

system stops every month or so, and all students are tested for mastery of objectives and then mechanistically regrouped for the next few weeks of instruction. The teacher's role is to manage the process. The data take shape, not in qualitative portfolios, but as computerized checklists.

The Limited Reach of Teachers' Assessments

Despite their richness, student portfolios and other records of assessment see little use beyond the individual teacher. When asked about student work from the previous year, teachers typically respond that the folders go home at the end of the school year. Notes and journals are discarded or packed into boxes. Little trace remains of the teacher's observations and judgments, the hard-won data from a year's interactions. Standardized test scores follow a youngster from grade to grade in the cumulative file; however, the lists of books read, the stories and reports authored, and teachers' reflections on group participation do not stay with the student. The next teacher is unlikely to know that Amanda read 50 books during 3rd grade, six of them Newbery Award winners far above her standardized reading test level. Nor will the teacher know that Jonathan handles routine tasks with ease but avoids demanding projects that require collaboration with his fellow students.

The current system also limits the use of teacher-gathered assessments by other interested parties. Take, for example, the situation when parents of an elementary school student request more grammar instruction for their child. When schools disregard teacher assessments, a principal cannot pro-

vide parents with examples of students' compositions to demonstrate that the school's integrated language arts program has produced high levels of written expression and correct usage without didactic grammar instruction.

In another scenario, state education officials present legislators with test scores showing that the state's students are above average on standardized reading and language tests. However, a survey of the state's teachers may reveal a different view. Teachers in high-achieving schools may not be convinced that their youngsters have attained their full potential to think and communicate, while those in low-achieving schools may worry that "practice the basic skills to achieve higher test scores" is bad advice for their clients. The dissonance between standardized test results and these concerns cannot be resolved when teacher-gathered data are not available to other stakeholders. At present, the *only* data available for consideration are the standardized test results.

Information from Teachers' Assessments

Flexibility of contexts and tasks is both a strength and a weakness in teachers' assessments. Whereas a writing sample may have been completed with relatively few constraints on time or topic, the conditions of standardized tests remain constant: students work alone under fixed time limits. As a result, comparability and reliability are less sure for informal measures than for standardized test scores—or at least they take different forms. To be sure, teachers' assessments are not produced through the psychometric machinery of standardized tests; the

teacher cannot claim a Cronbach alpha of .87 or a validity coefficient of .72. Nonetheless, assessments based on observations and performance samples are consistent and repeatable; and they provide insights often lacking in reports of standardized test results (Pikulski and Shanahan 1982). Furthermore, the ease with which teachers can vary contexts and tasks in classrooms means that the data provide more valid representations of students' performances in a variety of authentic situations (Messick in press).

Assessment through observations and sampling of performances and standardized tests captures the goals of instruction in different ways. If the instructional goal is to have students apply knowledge in different settings, and to employ what they have learned to create new images, then the typical test is an inadequate instrument. The standardized format requires only the ability to recognize the best answer. The requirements in classroom discussions and writing tasks are quite different: students must produce and arrange information in a way that others will comprehend. Today's typical classroom may not realize this vision, but tomorrow's classroom *should*; and the teacher's role in assessment will be critical for attaining this goal.

The flexibility of the assessment techniques available to the teacher also permits coverage of a wide variety of texts: long and short, easy and difficult, narrative and expository, written and spoken. Passages on standardized tests, on the other hand, are typically short and are studied in silence. To be sure, several states have designed tests with longer texts (Valencia and Pearson 1987, Wixson et al. 1987), but full-length novels or the complete expositions that

Photograph by Helen Downes



Whose chair is that, the one with nobody in it? Why, it's yours, whenever you drop in for a visit at James Russell Lowell School. It doesn't matter if you are the UPS person or the superintendent—sit there a few minutes, and you'll discover that children today can read, and what's more, they enjoy it.

dominate adult reading are absent from test materials. In contrast, teachers can create classroom settings to assess students' comprehension of a variety of genres (for example, biography, historical fiction, exposition, persuasion) that vary in length (for example, short paragraph, an entire book chapter, or even a complete book). In addition, teachers can allow variation in the required response to the text (for example, summarizing a paragraph or creating a screenplay from a novel).

Teachers can also vary the contexts in which they gather information. Students may perform differently when they are left to their own devices, provided supportive "scaffolding" from the teacher or an aide, or placed in a cooperative group. The dynamic assessment paradigm (Lidz 1987, Brown and Reeve 1985) provides a model for "experiments" designed to reveal the conditions under which a student performs well and those that represent upper limits of performance.

Data collection is another factor under the teacher's control. For instance, the teacher may decide to take special care to observe a particular student's responses during the regular events of the day. The student will not be aware that he or she is being "tested," and the test anxiety that may be detrimental to performance, especially for youngsters new to the situation or from minority backgrounds (Sarason 1980), will be alleviated. A more intrusive approach builds on questioning and discussion strategies (Dillon 1988, Graesser and Black 1985), where the teacher may plan a "funnel" approach (broad questions followed by more focused ones) to ascertain the degree of support needed by a particular student in order to handle a problem.

Performance samples, such as reports of stories that students have written and transcripts of retellings and oral readings, constitute a middle ground between observations and tests. Teachers can structure the tasks from which these samples come, thereby preserving the benefits of tests; they can use the everyday con-

texts of the classroom, thereby preserving the benefits of observations.

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum from observation are teacher-made tests. If teachers follow textbook advice, these examinations may resemble standardized instruments. However, much more flexibility is possible; for example, teachers can construct tests with the essay questions so rarely found on standardized tests.

Learning to Assess

How are teachers to acquire the skill and knowledge to handle the job of assessment in the buzzing confusion of the classroom? Ten years ago, in the second national conference on *Testing, Teaching, and Learning* (Tyler and White 1979), only one paragraph in a 400-page report alluded to this topic. Nevertheless, the situation is not hopeless. For instance, Moffett and Wagner (1983) provide more than 50 pages of cogent advice to teachers about how to design and implement

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an assessment approach that will serve a variety of purposes. Moffett and Wagner make two particularly significant points. First, the dilemma arises because "a lot of evaluation is needed, a number of parties and purposes must be served, and yet evaluation can destroy the very learning it is supposed to facilitate" (p. 498). (One solution is to embed evaluation in ongoing instructional procedures, along the lines suggested above, rather than casting it as a discrete item on the day's agenda.) Second, guiding students to reveal their thinking and learning is important: "Ordinarily students don't do enough to provide the evaluator something to see" (p. 499). By this statement, the authors do not refer to routine marks on a worksheet but to the "constant producing and receiving of discourse [where] the teacher is freed from emceeing to circulate and observe" (p. 499). Moffett and Wagner's text demonstrates what is possible, at both conceptual and practical levels.

Part of the burden for enhancing teachers' assessment skills lies with schools of education. Attention to assessment is superficial, if not completely lacking, in current preservice and inservice programs. As a result, many teachers lack confidence in their ability to assess student progress. In their preparation programs, teachers should be provided with a range of approaches that place testing in a proper balance with observation, interviewing, and per-

formance samples. Those who assume roles in administration, research, and evaluation also need experiences to familiarize them with a broader array of assessment techniques. For example, research and evaluation should include the qualitative as well as the traditional quantitative methods (Ragin 1987). For the moment, it is at the school level that teachers' assessment techniques need to be honed. We need to create a professional environment in which teachers can draw on one another's expertise through regular interaction around the goals of the school's literacy program.

Let's Tell the Good News About Reading and Writing

William D. Corbett

We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise
And then, if we are true to plan
Our statures touch the skies.
—Emily Dickinson

Elementary school children read and write better than they ever did. Yet this accomplishment is one of our best-kept secrets. Educators are keeping the secret from the 80 percent of Americans who do not have children in school. We share it only in part with the 20 percent who do.

How often have you heard people (with selective memories) say that children today cannot read or write the way we used to? Have you fed into this rumor by failing actively to disprove this misconception?

In the media, bad news of any kind transcends good news largely because it is dramatic and photographable. Have you ever counted the number of bad-news items reported on the nightly news telecast? Bad news is in the range of 75 percent, with neutral or good news fighting for the remaining 25 percent. Good news about education is practically nonexistent.

Let me respectfully suggest just a few ways that principals can highlight the good news.

Whenever possible, hear each child, in grades 1-4 at least, read a few pages to you. Give each child an on-the-spot encouraging written analysis. You will enjoy this effort, will find it valuable in your monitoring efforts, and above all, will let children know that you appreciate good reading. Ask them to read the same story to their parents or parent that evening.

When hearing children read, always set up four chairs in the corridor. Two are for the readers, and the third is for you. The fourth is for any school visitor: the superintendent, a parent, or the UPS delivery person. Each must spend a few minutes hearing a child read—because it is important to the child. Encourage visitors to spread the good news about children's reading.

Good news about student writing is desperately needed because it is often maligned in the media. Ask teachers to send sets of compositions to you regularly. Read them and comment on them. Send interesting papers to the superintendent. Post creative writing papers on the walls of the central office conference room. Place others on the walls of your local bank. Don't overlook your city hall, your supermarket, or the local pizza parlor. Citizens will be amazed at the children's skills and thoughts, teachers will enjoy proper recognition of their efforts, and, above all, children will learn that good reading and writing are important.

The beautiful thing about children is that they don't know that they can't do marvelous things in reading and writing. With enlightened instruction, every day they are doing them. Their statures touch the skies.

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The Role of Assessment in Decision Making

Classroom teachers work directly with students to attain the goals of schooling, but individuals outside the classroom also make decisions that influence student achievement. Evidence based on teacher assessments can prove useful at all levels of decision making. At the school level, teacher judgments can serve as the nexus for joining practitioner teams (including the principal and resource teachers) more coherently than at present (Fraatz 1987). Student portfolios pro-

vide vivid and engaging content for professional discussion and collegial sharing. Faculty meetings could draw on teachers' professional expertise if participants focused on the substance of curriculum and instruction, rather than worrying about the percentage of objectives above (or below) 80 percent correct. Portfolios of students' work can also create links between instruction at different grade levels. Last year's student projects can guide teachers' decisions about content coverage and placement of students, rather than "where we got in the basal."

Teachers' assessments can also enhance their interactions with principals. Teachers who claim that standardized tests are not valid bases for instructional decisions tend to discount principals who rely on such indices in reporting to the school staff. Principals are more likely to be effective when they join with the faculty in analyzing actual student work as the basis for informed professional judgments.

For school-related decisions made by parents and the community, standardized test scores should be considered in conjunction with teacher assessments. Standardized test scores in isolation are prone to misinterpretation. Conclusions like "The kids are doing poorly because they come from poor homes" or "The scores are high, therefore our children must be getting a good education" are easy to make in the absence of other data. Teachers' assessments can provide abundant data for individual families. Parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school nights, where samples of classroom activities can be directly examined, give parents concrete evidence of their children's progress toward literacy.

Two Important Improvements

By expanding the role of teachers' assessments, instruction can be improved in two important ways. First, attention would increasingly focus on the critical goals of school literacy programs that are not captured by current standardized tests. Second,

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teachers would have a mandate to become expert assessors of their students' capabilities. As teachers emphasize critical components of literacy and as their decisions about content and pace more accurately reflect student capabilities, instruction can only improve.

Reports based solely on standardized test scores portray a limited view of the literacy accomplishments of American students. A more comprehensive role for teacher assessments can broaden our perspective and provide better information about the conditions that promote learning. Most important, this shift could move us substantially closer to attaining the important goals of schooling. Citizens in the 21st century will not be judged by their ability to bubble in answers on test forms; their success both personally and professionally will depend on their capacity "to analyze, predict, and adapt—in short to think for a living..." (Kennedy 1988). Making use of the continuous and informed judgments of teachers is critical to the attainment of this goal. □

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