

Assessing Reading and Writing in the Early Years

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For Reflection and Action: Investigate and share what you learn about the major methods now used to assess literacy in your school or a school with which you are familiar. What is measured by each of these assessments? How is the information used?

Bill Harp and Jo Ann Brewer offer an abundance of practical suggestions as they stress the need for classrooms where instruction and assessment are highly interrelated.

The year 1998 saw remarkable consensus around important issues in bringing young children to literacy. The National Research Council (NRC) issued a landmark report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. The International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) issued a joint position statement entitled "Learning To Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children." Both of these important documents drew on years of research in

early literacy to make significant recommendations (some controversial) for programs and practices.

We begin this chapter by looking at the recommendations in these reports that have implications for assessment and evaluation with young readers and writers. By the end, we will have addressed all of the following topics:

- ◆ The assessment goals drawn from the NRC study and the IRA/NAEYC position statement
- ◆ How to use anecdotal records, checklists, and rating scales to record growth in literacy
- ◆ How to organize a literacy portfolio for a young child
- ◆ How attitude and interest surveys can be used in planning effective literacy instruction
- ◆ How to assess a child's knowledge of print features
- ◆ How to assess phonemic awareness
- ◆ How to assess a child's reading behavior and individualize instruction
- ◆ How to assess a child's writing behavior
- ◆ How to use reading and writing interviews as assessment procedures
- ◆ How to use a developmental continuum for assessing performance

The NRC Report

The NRC report recommends that attention be paid in every primary grade classroom to the full array of early reading accomplishments that children must make in order to be successful readers. These accomplishments are the development of phonemic awareness, understanding the alphabetic principle, developing a sight vocabulary, reading words by mapping speech sounds to parts of words, achieving fluency, and comprehension. The report further recommends that comprehension be enhanced by instruction aimed at developing background knowledge, concept and vocabulary growth, and knowledge about the syntax and rhetorical structures of written language. The 17-member committee that developed the NRC report also recommends direct instruction in comprehension strategies

such as summarizing, predicting, and monitoring. With regard to spelling and writing, the committee points out that instruction should be designed with the understanding that the use of invented spelling is not in conflict with teaching correct spelling. The writers note that beginning writing with invented spelling can actually be helpful in developing an understanding of segmentation in speech sounds and of phonics. However, the report states that correct spelling should be developed through careful instruction and practice, with final writing products correctly spelled.

Before we examine the assessment and evaluation implications of the NRC report, we shall look at the recommendations in the IRA/NAEYC joint position statement.

IRA/NAEYC Joint Position Statement

The instructional recommendations contained in the IRA/NAEYC joint statement are remarkably like those in the NRC report. Like the NRC report, the joint statement underscores the value of children developing phonemic awareness and understanding the alphabetic principle, the temporary use of invented spelling, the development of vocabulary and comprehension, and systematic code instruction, along with the reading of meaningful texts. But unlike the NRC report, the joint statement offers specific recommendations for assessment and evaluation. The joint statement calls for accurate assessment of children's knowledge, skills, and dispositions in reading and writing. It cautions that reading and writing cannot simply be measured as a set of narrowly defined skills on standardized tests.

The joint report makes the following statement about assessment:

[S]ound assessment should be anchored in real-life writing and reading tasks and continuously chronicle a wide range of children's literacy activities in different situations. Good assessment is essential to help teachers tailor appropriate instruction to young children and to know when and how much intensive instruction on any particular skill or strategy might be needed (p. 206).

The joint report calls for teachers to understand a developmental continuum of reading and writing and to be skilled in a variety of strategies to assess and support each child's development and learning across the continuum. In addition to tracking children's progress across a developmental continuum, teachers are urged to regularly and systematically use multiple assessments of reading and writing growth, such as observation of children's oral language, evaluation of children's work, and evaluation of performance on authentic reading and writing tasks.

The use of multiple-choice, standardized tests of reading and writing before third grade, and preferably before fourth grade, is strongly discouraged by the IRA and NAEYC. The joint statement offers the following argument against such practice:

The younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain valid and reliable indices of his or her development and learning using one-time test administrations. Standardized testing has a legitimate function, but on its own it tends to lead to standardized teaching—one approach fits all—the opposite of the kind of individualized diagnosis and teaching that is needed to help young children continue to progress in reading and writing (p. 210).

We can draw on both the NRC report and the IRA/NAEYC joint statement to guide us in planning assessment and evaluation activities in kindergarten through second grade.

Report Implications for Assessment and Evaluation in Kindergarten Through Grade 2

When we examine the instructional recommendations in both reports and the assessment recommendations in the joint report, we are able to list important areas in which kindergarten through grade 2 teachers should assess and evaluate children's performance. By *assess* we mean collect data. By *evaluate* we mean interpret that data to make instructional decisions. Figure 13.1 lists the assessment and evaluation goals for reading and writing in kindergarten through second grade culled from these reports.

With the assessment and evaluation goals identified, we now turn our attention to the tools we can use to meet these goals. Fortunately, several of the goals can be met through the use of a single tool. We will not need to use 15 tools to meet our 15 goals. However, we must keep one recommendation of the joint report in mind: Sound assessment should be anchored in real-life writing and reading tasks and should continuously chronicle a wide range of children's literacy activities in different situations.

The Power of Observation

We begin with a focus on observation because of the power it holds for us in understanding the behavior, attitudes, and understandings of our learners, both as readers and as writers. One of our most important goals in working with children is to deepen and extend our knowledge base so that we can become increasingly more careful and analytical observers of children.

When taken with care, informal observations can be enormously helpful to teachers in planning appropriate instruction for each young child. Learning to be a close observer of children is a skill that is valuable, and one that can be learned.

In addition to being an informed observer of children, we need to develop efficient ways to record our observations and analyze them for instructional purposes. Observational recording systems include anecdotal records, checklists, and rating scales. Different kinds of observations are recorded using each of these devices.

When making observations, you must first decide what kind of information is needed and what form of observation would be most efficient in obtaining that information. Anecdotal records have the advantage of providing more detail for later use, while checklists and rating scales are much quicker to use and do not require as much skill on the part of the observer. In comparison with anecdotal records, however, checklists and rating scales provide only limited information.

GOALS FOR READING AND WRITING ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION, K-2

1. Continually expands oral vocabulary
2. Has phonemic awareness
3. Has knowledge of letter names
4. Knows conventions of print (i.e., we read from right to left and from top to bottom)
5. Has knowledge of the alphabetic principle
6. Matches spoken words to written ones
7. Increasingly develops sight vocabulary
8. Uses invented spellings, moving toward conventional spellings
9. Decodes and blends sounds in words
10. Reads with increasing fluency
11. Writes with increasing fluency
12. Writes across genres and for varying audiences
13. Uses graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic cues with increasing efficiency
14. Uses strategies (predicting, confirming, summarizing, monitoring) when comprehension breaks down
15. Reads with increasing comprehension

Figure 13.1

Anecdotal Records

An anecdotal record is a recording of factual information. Most anecdotal records are short and record only one incident. Anecdotal records can be used to document behavior or social interactions as well as academic goals. Teachers choosing to use anecdotal records must consider the limitations and possible biases that can be involved in teacher records. Bias may exist on the part of the teacher or the child being observed. Teachers tend to see what they are looking for in children. For example, if the teacher feels that a child is not learning, then he or she might be more likely to record incidents focusing on the child's needs and ignore incidents that might indicate strengths. We also know that children are likely to change their behavior if they know they are being observed. We know that one anecdotal record is not very helpful, but a collection gathered over time may reveal meaningful patterns that can guide the teacher's planning. Teachers who are aware of the possible limitations or biases of anecdotal

records will take records frequently and interpret these records with care.

An anecdotal record should be as objective as we can make it. We try to record only what we observe, and if we make interpretations of those observations, we will make those interpretations clear in the record. For example, if we see a child slap a book down on a table, we could record that the child slapped the book on the table, but if we decide that the slapping behavior was a result of frustration on the child's part, that is an interpretation. Only if the child tells us that he "cannot read that awful book" do we have assurance that the feeling was frustration. Perhaps it was triumph over having finished his first book that led to slapping the book on the table.

We shall focus on the goals listed in Figure 13.1 and describe some possibilities for making useful anecdotal records related to those goals. For example, phonemic awareness means that a child knows that words are made up of a series of sounds. Phonemic awareness can be observed as children attempt to sound out the words they encounter in print. Children who have developed phonemic awareness can also participate easily in rhyming games or in activities in which they combine onsets with a variety of different rimes and determine which ones can be words.

Children's knowledge of letter names can be observed as a child plays with magnetic letters or selects letters from a box as a teacher requests them. Children frequently comment on their own knowledge by pointing out letters that are in their names or the names of their friends. While the teacher is reading a big book, some children will comment on the letters they are seeing.

As we observe children writing, we can easily record whether the child knows the principles of directionality in written English. Children can also make their knowledge of these principles clear as they use the pointer to lead the reading of a big book, a poster, or a song chart.

Children who are writing letters to record their messages have obviously learned the alphabetic nature of English and that sounds are recorded with letters. Even children who are in the random letter stage of spelling development know that it takes letters to record words and

that words are not written with one letter used over and over.

Children who can follow along with their fingers in a small book while the teacher reads the print from a big book or who can follow the words in a small song book while the class sings the song are able to match spoken words to written ones. Children can also be observed trying to match the print to the words they know. For example, they may have memorized the text of a simple book, but when they read it themselves, they may make no effort to match what they are saying to the print. As children become more aware of the print, they can be observed matching the print with the words they say or becoming confused if they are unable to make the print and their spoken words match.

As we observe children demonstrating various literacy abilities, we should date the record and record briefly what was observed and under what circumstances. For example, a record might read as follows:

11/1/99 Juan was using the pointer to lead the group in singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." He pointed to the correct word with 100% accuracy.

Or a record might read:

10/2/99 Susie was playing with the alphabet letters and naming them as she placed them on the magnetic board. She named all of the letters accurately except Q.

Because teachers make many observations in the course of a day, there will never be time to rewrite them in another form after school, so we suggest that teachers keep anecdotal records on computer labels or some other self-sticking material that can be placed directly in the child's record. A loose-leaf binder with a page for each child is one way to store these records. If you complete more formal observation tasks, these records can also be placed in the binder. Such records need to be reviewed on a regular basis and evaluated. These observations guide daily planning as teachers think about what a child or children need to be better readers or writers. A summary statement of all observations and indications for instruction can be made every grading period or every month.

Anecdotal records can also be extremely useful in recording the child's attitudes toward reading and writing. For example, when choices are allowed in the classroom, how often does the child choose to read or write? How excited is the child to find a word that she recognizes in the newspaper? Do the children bring to school drawings or writing they have done at home? How often does the child bring a book to school that she is reading at home? Does the child choose to participate in story sessions? Does the child initiate literacy activities, such as making signs in the block areas or writing a prescription for a patient in the doctor's office? It is important for us to know whether the child's interests in reading and writing are being strengthened or weakened.

Anecdotal records can provide information that we cannot access in other ways, but for some information, a quick check to show who can or cannot complete some tasks may be enough to aid classroom planning. One alternative to the anecdotal record is a checklist.

Checklists

A checklist is a list on which the teacher records an observation of a task being completed. Usually a checklist is dated whenever a certain task is observed, but the checklist does not indicate how many trials were necessary or with what level of skill the task was completed. For example, a checklist might have an item labeled "chooses a book," meaning that the child chooses a book for sustained silent reading. It is dated whenever the child is able to go to the bookshelves and choose a book without prompting from the teacher.

A checklist might also be used to record such observations as the use of various strategies when the child is reading. For example, the checklist might be labeled "reads on," "checks illustrations," or "asks a friend," and when the child is observed using these strategies, it can be recorded on a checklist. Checklists might be more formal, such as the list in Figure 13.2, which helps teachers record reading behaviors that are important as children develop as readers.