



Literacy assessment and the future

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I once asked a group of fourth graders, “Are there different kinds of readers in your class?” Sean (all student names are pseudonyms) told me that “There’s ones like the people who’s not good and the people who are good” and made it clear that he saw himself in the former category. For example, he did not feel sufficiently worthy to contribute to class book conversations (Johnston, 2004, p. 19). To learn about a pen pal as a reader, Sean said he would ask the pal’s “level.” In another fourth-grade class, Henry used a different scale. He responded, “Steve, he reads longer books than other people. And Dan, when he gets into a book, you’re not going to stop him. Jenny, she reads hard books like Steve. But, she finishes books, like, really fast.... Priscilla, she really likes to read mysteries. She reads long stories, like Nancy Drew” (p. 94). Roger, he said, prefers the Bailey School Kids books, just like he does. To learn about a pen pal as a reader, Henry would ask what that pal was reading and about favorite books and authors.

Henry and Sean’s assessments of themselves and their peers are important because they tell us about the literacies they are acquiring, something on which their test scores are largely silent. Their comments remind us what it means to acquire literacy—not merely particular knowledge and skills but also identities, values, dispositions, and relationships (Gee, 1996). We have to ask what sort of literacies we want children to acquire so that they will thrive along with the literate society to which they contribute. Children’s assessments of themselves and their peers are also important because children are in part socialized by classroom

assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Crooks, 1988).

What kind of literacy should assessments reflect?

The literate demands of the real world are changing rapidly. Indeed, the only certainties are the rapid change, an increasingly multicultural and multilingual environment, and the disappearance of any remaining boundaries between print and other media. How do we prepare students for this future and a lifetime of literate change? They will need literacies that are resilient, flexible, self-directed, open, and collaborative (Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2003), and acquisition of these literacies begins early. These kinds of literacies are also necessary if students are to help societies evolve into strong democracies—literacies in which it seems natural to consider others’ interests and views as strongly as one’s own, knowing that engaging them opens possibilities for new meanings, solutions, and actions. Our assessments must reflect and encourage these literacies.

Monitoring and guiding literate learning

Classroom assessment can socialize children into monitoring and guiding their own literacy learning. It requires organizing our assessment interactions so that rather than telling children how they are doing, we help them to self-evaluate and to

have a propensity for doing so. Children struggling with literacy constantly turn to the teacher for feedback. This reliance on external monitoring indicates that children have assessed themselves as incapable of assessing their own learning. Turning this situation around requires teachers to view children as if they *can* know what they know, how they are doing, and how they can tell. Just starting with “How’s it going?” and moving to “How can you tell?” or “How can you check?” will help. Practices like having children rank different pieces of writing (perhaps work in their portfolio, anonymous work from previous students, or even writing from published sources) while articulating their logic builds conversations in which children can internalize productive self-monitoring criteria. Asking questions like “As a writer, what have you learned most recently, how did you learn that, what would you like to learn next, and how will you go about that?” force on the child the identity of a writer with a sense and position of agency and learning trajectory (Johnston, 2004). Developing children’s self-assessment gives them control of their own learning with the added bonus that they increase their achievement (McDonald & Boud, 2003).

Resilience

Resilience is the disposition to maintain a focus on learning in the face of difficulty. It’s opposite is brittleness and ego-defensive behaviors (Carr & Claxton, 2002). Assessments of this disposition in kindergarten can predict word recognition in grades 1 and 2 better than assessments of phonological awareness (Niemi & Poskiparta, 2002). Resilience is not the same as competence. The most competent students can be brittle learners, making them prone to giving up when the going gets tough.

Resilient learners believe that ability is less relevant than engagement and that engagement and challenge lead to ability. Their assessment experiences have turned their attention toward the learning process more than to the performance and have not led them to believe that ability is permanent or that it has anything to do with their value as a human being. The opposite is true for brittle learners. They believe that experiencing difficulty with a literate task demonstrates either a lack of ability (or

a disability), so they systematically avoid challenging tasks (Dweck, 1999). When brittle learners feel they have been unsuccessful, they indulge in negative talk about themselves and inaccurately recall more occurrences of failure than they have actually experienced. Resilient learners are quite accurate in their recall of successes and failures, though they do not necessarily concede that they failed, only that they aren’t yet where they want to be in their learning. Unlike brittle learners, they choose challenging tasks when they feel they will learn something, even when they might risk getting a bad grade. Resilient learners view more competent students as a resource rather than a threat.

Normative testing practices make both teachers and students view learners the way Sean did: They are “good ones” or “not good ones.” This view can foster brittleness. Competitive pressure and overly difficult situations (just the sort of context produced for some children by current testing practices) actually magnify the effects of brittle learning dispositions, and our ongoing classroom assessments strongly contribute to these dispositions. The statement, “Good job, you’re a good writer,” and its implicit possibility of not being a good writer is the kind of assessment that can lead to brittleness. “The dialogue you have used to open this draft really got my attention. How did you learn to do that?” is the kind of assessment that develops a resilient literacy learner, particularly if it is coming from peers as well as the teacher.

Reciprocity

A literate disposition of reciprocity is required of citizens in a democracy—“a willingness to engage in joint learning tasks, to express uncertainties and ask questions, to take a variety of roles in joint learning enterprises and to take others’ purposes and perspectives into account” (Carr & Claxton, 2002, p. 16). Standard comprehension assessment practices such as retellings and known-answer questions do not develop this disposition. Collaborative retellings or discussions of controversial or complex issues in books would develop it, as would turning attention to the process or collaborative meaning making as in the following example: “How did your book discussion go today? How might you make it better next time?”

The National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP), charged with evaluating the qualities of education in New Zealand, takes this kind of literacy seriously. In one of the NEMP's test items, a group of children, within a limited time frame, must act as a class library committee, evaluating a set of books first individually and then together as a group and justify their selections (Flockton & Crooks, 1996). The activity requires the students to generate and negotiate evaluative criteria for the qualities of books, apply the criteria, take a position, argue persuasively, actively listen, and negotiate a group position. This authentic activity reveals independent and interdependent literate practices that foreground reciprocity. A teacher following such an activity with the question "What did you learn from that process?" would encourage children to recognize the significance of engaging others' interests and perspectives and to view diversity not as error or distraction but as a potential learning resource.

What is assessed is what is taught

It is true that what is assessed is what is taught—perhaps truer than we have acknowledged. The ways we make assessments contribute to the development or demise of forms of literacy. Our assessment practices must help produce learners who are resilient and view literacy learning, rather than performance or ability, as their priority. They should produce literacy learners with the disposition to articulate their learning processes and perspectives, including their struggles, in ways that sustain strategic flexibility and mutual engagement.

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