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Noticing and responding to learners: Literacy evaluation and instruction in the primary grades

Instruction and evaluation are linked in this kindergarten classroom.

In this article, I describe a program that effectively enables me to reach my kindergarten students. As a consequence, the children in my class show dramatic growth, particularly in their reading and writing development. I am able to individualize the classroom instruction more effectively due to my increased focus on and awareness of each child's progress. My program, which includes parents, is instrumental in helping me become a more effective primary teacher.

I am working to clarify my beliefs about literacy and learning, so that my curriculum and instruction are congruent. As suggested by Cambourne (1994), the evaluation tools I use need to match my instruction. So too, suggests the International Reading Association in a 1988 resolution on assessment, "Reading assessment must reflect advances in the understanding of the reading process" (as cited in Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 43).

Anders (in press) suggests a stance on learning theory may be aligned with one of the three major models of reading: traditional subskills model, eclectic model, or a whole language transactive model. We may believe language is learned piece by piece or that we learn language more holistically based on the surrounding context. Our beliefs relate to how we work in our classrooms.

My historical perspective on reading education has guided the development of my program. My stance towards holistic instruction and evaluation has been evolving, even from my early years as a general music teacher. I have been developing and refining my beliefs on learning through many years of teaching, talking, risk taking, reflecting, college coursework, and sharing language with my preschool son.

I now believe in and attempt to practice holistic instruction. I am working to develop holistic ways of evaluating learners' growth. Turbill (1994) suggests that such an "everyday model of evaluation" includes "opportunities to observe, interact, intervene, and participate in whatever is being evaluated" (p. 12). I want instruction and evaluation to be in meaningful authentic contexts.

I begin by describing various evaluation events that are integrated throughout curriculum

(pp. 550–559)

and across instruction. Next I discuss the importance of planning to write and reflect each day. Further, I describe the organization and management of the evaluation tools and data. Finally, I look at how the students in my classroom benefit from this approach and what the program means for students, parents, and teachers.

Evaluation throughout the curriculum

Evaluation is ongoing throughout the entire day. While engaged in learning, children show us what their capabilities are and what they are attempting to learn. As children are involved in learning events, I record information and hypothesize about their learning. Goodman (1985) tells us of the value of kidwatching: "Through observing the reading, writing, speaking, and listening of friendly, interactive peers, interested, kidwatching teachers can understand and support child language development" (p. 9).

In other words, I look closely to find out what kids know in a variety of contexts. I work to see and hear what the children notice about literacy each day. For example, when I look at students' written work, miscues "often signal that the child is reaching out to some new facet of written expressions, and that he needs help towards some new learning" (Clay, 1975, p. 35). I analyze their learning both in process and as products, and I work to respond in ways that support and challenge their learning. One way to look at evaluation and instruction is by progressing through our daily classroom activities.

Greetings/calendar. Students get daily routines going, such as the pledge of allegiance, calendar, and other responsibilities. During the calendar discussion, I notice things about our calendar leader. Does she have one-to-one voice-print match? Does she move left to right and from the top down on a calendar text? I also look at the whole group and notice who is actively engaged and who appears to need some guidance or redirection. As I notice these specific details, I jot down a few notes on my lesson plan clipboard or sticky notes. These notes are rewritten and expanded at the end of the day.

Sometimes I share my observations with the students right away. For example, one day Alan pointed out that we forgot to read the days of the week. So we read the list in Spanish, then in English. I asked, "What day is today?" Several children chimed out "Friday." "How do you know?" Ryan told us, "You have to read down, down, down…." Beth explained, "'Cause it goes, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and *Friday*!" Matt also explained his logic, "Friday's next to Sunday…I mean Saturday." Each student shared different logic. All responses were accepted and valued. "Oh, so there are a lot of different ways to find out what day it is?" "Yeah!"

These students are sharing some of their thinking processes, and they are also teaching their peers different ways to think about stories.

Read aloud. The next activity on a typical morning is a read-aloud session. When I read literature to my class, kids are actively involved in the story. Many students have ideas and questions they want to share. Through their comments and questions, some students may, for example, connect a story to their lives, connect a book to another book, notice specific details in illustrations, question the author as to "why" a character did or said something, laugh and enjoy the story (evidence that they are comprehending), share their knowledge to increase others' understanding of the story, or spontaneously dramatize a part of the story.

When I am reading a story, I make mental notes of students who volunteer and share ideas. Later in the day I write about students whose comments were unusual or stood out in some way. These students are sharing some of their thinking processes, and they are also teaching their peers different ways to think about stories.

When we go to the library, and the librarian reads aloud, or when a parent visits our class to read, I have a greater opportunity to observe students. I focus on the students and record my observations on paper immediately. It is much easier to record data when someone else is reading a book aloud.

Figure 1
A grid helps record students' thoughtful responses to literature, to be used for evaluation purposes

	Jean	James	Stefeny	Dallas	Ryan	Jimmy	Matt	Beth	Steve	Sally	Brenda	Susie
Responds to adult's questions	X	X X	X	X X		X	X	X		X X	X	
Comments or interprets					XX X				X			
Connects book to life												X
Asks a question									X			
Makes a prediction										X	X	
Shares background info.							X					
Tangent?												X

I have developed a grid system to take notes during these times (see Figure 1). The librarian reads to the children, they get to enjoy the story, and I observe the students. Each time I observe kids as they respond to a story, their responses are unique. The categories are different for every grid; they evolve based on the children's particular responses of the day. It is through students' conversation that I am able to evaluate their thinking and also encourage others to do the same.

Writer's workshop. Our writer's workshop has four parts: (a) model writing; (b) sharing student journal entries; (c) journal writing; and (d) writing conferences.

Model writing is used to focus learners on one or two specific aspects of print. It is an instructional activity but also helps me find out what students know. The main teaching points come from me; others occur spontaneously from the kids. As I demonstrate by writing a journal entry on a large chart tablet, students are invited to support my thinking and writing. As kids provide an appropriate letter or sound, or take a risk or remind me to leave a space between two words, I make a mental note or write comments about students' specific shared learnings. As students help me with my work, I evaluate their understanding while I am instructing. Model writing is a good place for whole-group instruction that is based on observations and evaluations made about students' understandings during journal writing or guided reading and writing.

For example, I encourage kids to write stories on their own. In journals, I have seen that several students write words they have memorized. I acknowledge this strategy, but I also want children to take risks and figure out some letters that represent other words they want to write. Beginning writers don't need to write every letter of every word, but I want them to realize that they can write one or two letter sounds for each word they are writing.

My model writing lesson has several parts: (a) I draw the picture, and students make predictions about my story based on their perceptions of my drawing; (b) I tell a brief story to go with my picture; (c) Kids volunteer letter sounds to write for each word. The students then do the writing; (d) As I point to the writing, the children read the text. We discuss how

we don't have to have every single letter to figure out the word. As the school year progresses, we also look for patterns in the writing, which leads us to specific teaching points.

Sharing student journal entries is another way to prepare for writing. Bobbi Fisher (1991) suggests we validate students' efforts as writers by encouraging them to share their work. Students who choose to share a journal may display their work in the classroom or talk about it with the whole class. All class members are invited to share comments and questions or tell what they notice about the writer's work. During this time students and teacher are evaluating and instructing. We can learn from each other about what makes a good journal entry.

We all look at the individual's work and try to understand what s/he is doing as a writer. Then we respond in a positive, supportive manner. Students become better equipped to self-evaluate and inform their own writing development.

In addition to sharing single journal entries, at times we share a complete portfolio. One writing sample from each month of the school year is stapled together. We look briefly at a collection. I ask the children, "What do you notice about Sally's writing?" Everyone looks to see how her writing has changed from August to January. Several students share their thoughts. Lane makers a very powerful insight when he tells us, "She's making more connections with letters and sounds." Lane knows how to recognize literacy development. He is evaluating Sally's work and instructing his peers.

Journal writing occurs after we have evaluated one another's writing or had a model writing lesson. This is a time for each child to work independently at a level that is personally appropriate. Everyone is responsible for drawing, writing his or her name, and writing a story. I expect to see different things from different students.

Writing conferences start once children are on task. I work individually with 3 to 5 students each day. I ask the child to "Tell me about your work" and the conference begins from there. I may write the child's dictation, or we may do some dialogue or shared writing; the child then reads back the written text. With more opportunities for us to work together, each child gains more self-confidence, takes more writing risks, and builds on those letter sounds s/he already knows.

As we confer, I record bits of information as to what stood out about the work, any special comments made by the child, and letters and sounds that the child used appropriately in his/her writing. I also suggest to the child a strategy that might be tried next time. Later that day, these brief comments, which I write on sticky notes, are transferred to each student's individual record page of writing observations.

My teaching responses are grounded in evidence from children's journal work. I must support and challenge each child in relation to the unique strengths and weaknesses that are in evidence both in that journal entry and those from the days and months beforehand.

During a particular writing conference, Beth and her peers began seeing, hearing, and talking about her literacy strengths. Beth and I were doing some collaborative writing to put together the text she had dictated for her drawing. She had already written down words she knew (names of people in her family). During this conference, some classmates overheard and commented, "Beth knows a lot!" "She's really smart!" "Beth knows a lot of her letters and sounds!" Students initiated this conversation, and I agreed with them. Beth beamed with pride because classmates were commenting about her strengths as a writer.

In another example, Matt's mom came in to visit. I opened my evaluation notebook to the anecdotal records section. I found a recent entry about Matt's writing. I was immediately reminded that he had invented the spelling for *cyclops*, and it was very recognizable to adults. I shared this with his mother and commented that this was one of the first times he had invented spelling on his own. Since his mom's visit, Matt has continued to take more risks and use invented spellings in his journal.

Shared reading. Each day, after we complete writer's workshop, we regroup with shared reading activities that take many forms. In a whole group, all learners are able to successfully participate when we read chorally. We may read big books or poetry, sing songs, or chant. We focus on enjoying the text; then I draw students into the print for one or two specific teaching points. This procedure was initially developed by Don Holdaway (1979) to

accommodate students' wide range of language and literacy abilities. Shared reading mimics the parent-child home reading situation.

Shared reading is a good place to connect evaluation with instruction. Students share what they know, instructing one another. I can observe and evaluate what children are noticing, plan future lessons to help clarify misconceptions, and lead them further in their literacy development.

After reading, I often ask, "Who wants to show what they know?" Children's contributions give me evidence of their current development. I keep track of their comments and elaborate on my notes at the end of the day. I don't try to recall everything that is contributed by all the children. I stay alert for comments from children who have been struggling or have not been showing much development, or those who seem to be noticing something unusual.

Shared reading is a good place to connect evaluation with instruction.

For example, we chorally read *Sing a Song* (Melser, 1980). After we read together, kids start to make some observations. "There's a *s*. And another *s*. There's lot of them!" remarks Ryan. I notice that he is locating specific letters in the context of the story. Early in the year, he had a low letter identification score, but now Ryan is showing me that he is ready to look more closely at specific letters.

Centers. Learning centers are where I enhance students' literacy development within content area learning. Four to 7 students, grouped heterogeneously, work at each of the 4 or 5 different centers in the classroom. Centers may include math, social studies, science, computer use, and art. A balance of independent and collaborative learning is structured into the centers.

During center time I work with a group at a guided reading center, which provides me a rich opportunity to see specific reading behaviors in action. At the guided reading center we reread a familiar book. Then the group is introduced to a new predictable book. We look at the front cover and title. I ask students to tell me what they know about the topic or predict what the book may be about. We also look at a few pages together, perhaps noticing some illustration details, and I draw out more of the students' background knowledge.

Then I ask the students to read and solve problems along the way. I encourage them to think about the story as they read. I also ask them to read together and listen to one another. They solve problems as they read the text chorally for the first time. When they hesitate, I remain silent for several seconds, giving them opportunities to do the reading work without me. If they continue to struggle, I ask questions to guide their thinking. I use questions like, "What would make sense?" "What would sound right?" "What's happening in the story?" "What can the picture tell you?" "What would make sense and look right?" As a last resort, I read the word. After the children read through the text together, I ask for a volunteer to read the book aloud for the group.

During the group choral reading and the individual rereading, I have the opportunity to watch and listen to what the readers are showing me they can do. Sometimes I come into a guided reading session with some specific information I want to find out. I ask for specific information such as: "Show me the front cover" or "Show me a capital letter." In addition to these specific questions, students lead the way, and I write down what they show me as they read: left-to-right progression on a page; one-to-one voice and print match; reading with expression; miscues, which the group can talk about as we become more aware of the language systems and strategies being used; attitude and interest in reading; and more.

In one experience, Jean and I were preparing for her to read *Zoo-Looking* (Fox, 1986) to her mom after school. Jean had read this book for the first time that morning at our guided reading center. I asked Jean, "Could I read it with you, or do you want to read it yourself?" She quickly responded, "I want to read it myself!" She continued to demonstrate her confidence, motivation, and interest in reading, as she worked through this 16-page text. She kept the story intact and read with high-quality miscues. Jean, her mom, and I talked about how

well she read and made sense of the story. Both Jean and her mom appeared extremely proud.

I take brief notes during these guided reading sessions. At the end of the week, the recorded information will be transferred to checklists. Other notes become brief narrative anecdotes about children's reading growth and risk taking. (I'll explain more about checklists and anecdotes later.) All these notes are collected into an evaluation binder. I look at these notes to see how children appear to be progressing as readers and how I can plan the next guided reading session to give more support and challenge as it is needed.

Choice time. During this time, students choose an activity, materials, and peers with whom they wish to work. Some of our activity areas include two computer workstations, book and tape center, chalkboard, building blocks, sand table, art, housekeeping, games, math manipulatives, classroom library, piano, and rhythm instruments. Some choices are available throughout the year; others come and go or evolve as the need arises.

Choice time is another opportunity for evaluation and instruction. I can hold individual conferences, provide minilessons for a small group, or introduce a new activity that we'll all be doing within the next few days. I can sit back and observe the students in action, take field notes, and evaluate children when they are involved in an activity of their choice. I observe how they work in this situation, as compared to a task that I structure. Choice time gives me the opportunity to be more informal with kids. We can get to know one another as we talk, play, and learn together.

For example, one day Craig and I were talking about how all the people in the class are teachers. I mentioned that it's good to ask kids for help too, not just the adults. He didn't seem to agree with me. Then I reminded him how he responds when we share stories—he frequently asks questions, shares ideas, and makes connections. I told Craig he helps others learn how to think about stories. He smiled and said, "I know!" Craig is beginning to realize that he is a teacher, and his classmates are teachers, too. By evaluating Craig's active response to books and by helping Craig see his strengths, I was able to instruct him to use peers as resources, just as they might use him as a resource.

Drop Everything And Read. The last thing we do each day is Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) time. Students choose whatever materials they wish to read and are encouraged to read with a buddy or by themselves if they prefer. Some students will be quite comfortable reading a book independently; others will be more effective if they work with a classmate. I believe that by offering students the choice of reading alone or with peers, they will become more motivated and successful than if I had not offered any choices.

Another option for me at this time is to have individual reading conferences. Students who choose to may read a book for me; then we talk about and enjoy the story, and we discuss some strategies the child is using. We also talk about ways to improve on what the reader is already doing. During this time, I may do an informal miscue analysis, and I take notes during the time the child is reading. I tell the child, "I am going to write down some good things that I see and hear you doing, so we can go back and talk about a few of them after you read." Most children seem to thrive on this individual attention, and it gives everyone a chance to read, read, read.

Sometimes I hypothesize about what a student is doing with a particular miscue. When a student reads something that does not appear in the written text, I have an opportunity to find out about the child's thinking.

For example, Brenda read from *All of Me* (Butler, 1989): "You can see my eyes." The text actually was: "See my eyes."

Brenda's insertion of two words suggests several things. She appeared to construct meaning from the sentence. When she added the two words, the meaning of the text was not changed significantly. She knew it would be logical and sound right to read "You can see my eyes." (She actually inserted "You can" in five pages of an eight-page book.) It is possible that this patterned language text was too "simple" a text structure to offer much support or information. After all, we generally don't speak in three-word sentences once our personal oral language development is more complex. Her focus and strengths appeared to be in the area of making meaning and using syntax. These are two very positive forces for a reader to bring to a text.

By noticing Brenda's strengths, I can plan instruction. She appears to need instructional support that will help integrate her use of semantics and syntax with the graphophonic cueing system. This will influence book selection, teaching points, and guiding questions for individual work with Brenda and also in small-group and whole-class lessons.

During DEAR time each child is encouraged to build up a collection of books they can read independently. I ask students to read a book for any adult in the classroom and show that they can read the text on their own. As a child reads a book successfully (the meaning of the story is kept intact, even though some of the words may not have been read exactly as printed), the book then goes into their personal book boxes. In these cut-off, empty cereal boxes, they build a collection of stories they can read.

I look in book boxes for patterns or learning trends. Maybe a child is reading and collecting pattern books with two-word sentences. I need to encourage this reader to work with more complex sentence structures. Maybe another student's book box is empty. I need to find some books that will give this reader some immediate success.

Finding time to write and reflect

At day's end, I sit down at my desk and pull out my stack of anecdotal records. I write brief anecdotes for the five different students I had selected to focus on for the day. I write these anecdotal records in about 15 minutes each day.

I choose children to focus on each morning. Before students arrive I look through my stack of anecdotal papers (a loose-leaf page for each child) to see which children I have not written about yet that week. Students whose progress is not yet "documented" go onto the top of my stack. Of these children, I consider those that: (a) I don't know very well, (b) I have less information on than I would like, (c) seem to be somewhat quiet in class, (d) approach me less frequently than many of their peers, (e) may be at a plateau or struggling in their literacy development, and (f) are a concern and a challenge for me.

These children become my priority for the day. I choose to watch and learn from them so that I may find out more about them as individual learners. I don't ignore students who are successful. My focus is on the children I have preselected, yet ultimately whatever happens within the context of the classroom determines who I write about. Anyone who stands out in some way may be a candidate for a narrative anecdote.

Over the course of the week, I have written about and observed each child at least once. These anecdotes could be about any part of the curriculum, including social development. I think of the child and about what s/he seemed to notice about literacy that day, took a risk about, had a strong successful experience with, or shared with a classmate or the entire class. It may be something that I remember from a read-aloud session, the computer lab, or free-choice playing or learning. Every anecdote is different! Here are two examples:

> Dec. 7 Art Center—Kathleen and her committee (Ryan, Matt, and Steve) were very successful with a pattern chain today. They talked over their plan and were very cooperative as they created their "AABC" chain.
>
> Dec. 12 Whole group—Read Aloud—Lane was making predictions for the story *Milk and Cookies* (Asch, 1982). He continues to show interest and creativity in sharing ideas connected to books. "They have a chair like ours!" He was talking about the rocking chair we have in our classroom.

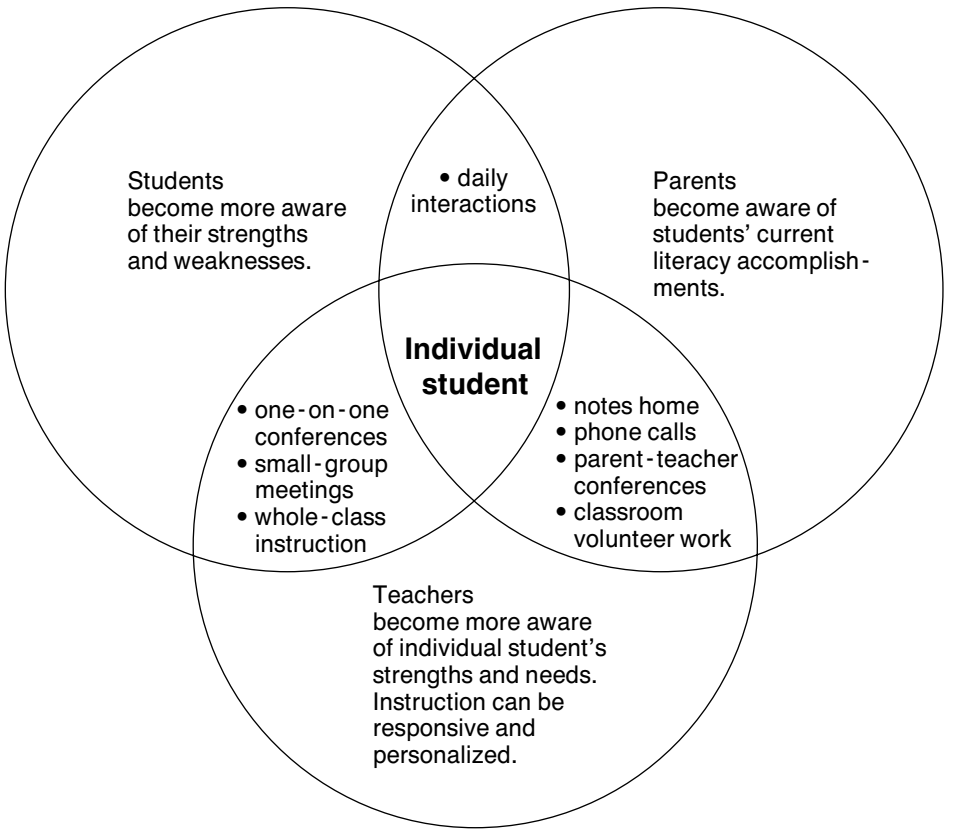
Over time, I simply compile stories about each child. Rhodes and Nathenson-Mejia (1992) suggest that anecdotes in narrative form are "a natural and easy way to impart information about students' literacy progress" (p. 503). Throughout our curriculum I am getting to know students better. I am creating a data bank that I will reread, reflect on, and use to look for patterns indicating growth and needs for specific instructional support. Responsibilities and relationships between and among students, parents, and teachers become clarified and strengthened with this evaluation and instruction model (see Figure 2).

Managing the data

It is important to keep various evaluation instruments organized and easily accessible. I use a binder, clipboards, self-adhesive mailing address labels, sticky notes, and portfolios.

The binder is organized by sections: checklists, daily anecdotes, writing observations, library read-aloud observations, guided reading notes, reading conference information, letter identification (Clay, 1979), math evaluation charts, and observation notes describing students in various settings. This organization

Figure 2
Evaluation and instruction connections strengthen relationships between and among teachers, students, and parents



seems to work well for day-to-day use. For conferences, the binder is reorganized to have one section for each child, so all the information is in one place.

I created my own set of literacy checklists after having used and read about many others. They have several purposes. The items on the checklists serve as markers of literacy behaviors that I expect to see in my students. This helps guide my observations. I also keep written records of what children are accomplishing in other areas. By creating my own checklists, I am sure these markers reflect my beliefs about literacy development. The five lists I currently use include: (a) attitudes and motivation toward stories, (b) bookhandling and print awareness, (c) directionality, (d) emergent strategies and strategy use, and (e) evidence of letters and sounds used in guided writing.

Each checklist is further subdivided into different facets of literacy that I believe to be important in students' development. I use these checklists to remind myself of the various kinds of reading and writing development that occur and to create a concise record of students' literacy behaviors. As Church (1994) points out, checklists are primarily developed and used "to sharpen the teachers' observational and listening skills rather than serve as the kind of checklist tool we used to use to determine whether the child measured up or not" (p. 259).

The information I record on the checklists comes from various settings. I transfer what I learn about students throughout the day. Much of this information comes from the guided

reading sessions and the reading and writing conferences.

Writing conferences lead me to become organized with other materials. At the beginning of the week, I prepare a clipboard with several strips of mailing address labels. I have written each child's name across the top of a label. When I confer with a writer, I write brief comments; later I transfer the labels into individual student's writing pages, which are kept on loose-leaf paper in my evaluation binder. As the week progresses, I see which children I need to confer with, making sure to meet with each child at least once a week. The information I collect during writing conferences guides my planning for future model writing sessions.

The next tool in my evaluation notebook is a letter identification task. Children engage in this summative task several different times during the year. (For a more complete explanation, see Clay, 1979, pp. 23–27, 119.) Individually, I give the student a chart of letters, which appear in random order. I ask the child to point and tell me what s/he knows. I record the responses, whether it is an alphabetic response (*s*), letter sound (*sssssss*…..), word (*snake*), or incorrect response. This tool helps me notice growth, strengths in recognizing upper or lower case letters, or confusions such as *b/d* or *u/n*. These assessments also inform instructional decisions for those students who need further focus in letter recognition. I use this tool about two or three times a year with each child, as needed, to show growth from the baseline data.

I also look at students' math development. I have developed a one-page chart on which I can record math abilities and growth over the year. This chart is largely based on the *Math Their Way* program (Baratta-Lorton, 1976). I record information about each child with various math tasks two or three times throughout the year, in order to document growth and inform instruction.

The final section in my notebook is baseline information. At the beginning of the year I want to get a sense of each child in various classroom settings. I consciously choose to observe children in various contexts in our classroom. For approximately the first 3 weeks of school, I record information about children in these settings: (a) read aloud, (b) choral reading and shared reading, (c) model writing, (d) journal writing, (e) independent or buddy reading, (f) listening and reading along with a story on tape, (g) free choice, (h) computer, and (i) sign-in sheet.

I keep one sheet for each child, and I work to "see" each child in several different settings. This tool, an adapted form of Marie Clay's "roaming around the known" as described by Marks and O'Flahavan (1994), has given me a baseline from which each student shows growth in literacy development. In Anne's case, I used this observation sheet to help me get to know her, as she joined our classroom midway into the first quarter.

We also have writing portfolios, based on a model described by Bobbi Fisher (1991). Once a week students choose their "best work" to add to their portfolio. Each child then files his or her writing into a hanging file folder, which is in a plastic crate. Students and visitors always have access to these files. These portfolio entries show strong evidence of children's growth over the school year. Portfolio collections and any of the above-mentioned evaluation records are powerful documents to share with parents at conferences.

All these data sources help me to build a descriptive story of each student's learning. Through triangulation of these sources, my understanding becomes more integrated, valid, and complete. This understanding affects my perception of myself as a professional, the instruction I offer my students, and my relationship with both my students and their parents.

Conclusions

Through my program of literacy evaluation and instruction, I make sound instructional decisions based on information I collect about individual students. Powerful connections occur between and among students, parents, and teacher. This model helps me understand and analyze complex interrelationships.

Children learn more about their strengths and strategies as learners. I work to understand students' efforts, commend them, and respond in ways that support and challenge future growth. Students also learn how they can support one another's learning. As I continue to refine this program, I anticipate that my students will show me more clear evidence of their literacy development.

Parents and I communicate about learners' strengths and needs in ways that are comfortable, such as conversations, brief notes, or phone calls. I share anecdotal information with parents, and it is well received. Parents learn about their child's specific literacy development and classroom curriculum and instruction.

Finally, due to this lens of evaluation, I believe I am a better teacher. I select and develop evaluation and instruction tools and techniques. The big decisions are guided by interpreting children's learning based on the interconnection of evaluation and instruction. As I learn more about literacy development, my beliefs evolve yet remain the backbone of my program. My students' literacy development is powerfully evident, and I am confident in my teaching.

Author notes

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