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The Writing Observation Framework: A Guide for Refining and Validating Writing Instruction

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The Writing Observation Framework (WOF) is a new tool for enhancing writing instruction in schools. The WOF organizes principles of writing instruction in a way that improves the evaluation of teachers' writing practices, encourages a shared philosophy of the writing process and its instruction, and assists schools in demonstrating the integrity of their writing programs.

The literacy instruction children receive in school exerts a powerful influence on their ability to read and write (Fountas & Pinnell,

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1996). Because of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education. 2001), U.S. society now demands assurances that schools will adequately prepare all children to be successful readers and writers; thus, public accountability for effective literacy instruction is at an all –time high. While poor reading achievement is at the heart of most of the dissatisfaction with literacy instruction in school (Allington & Cunningham.1996; Braunger & Lewis, 1998), an even greater number of schoolchildren fail to become effective writers. For example, the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 60% of U.S. 12th grader read at or below the "basic" achievement level (Donahue, Voelkl. Campbell. & Mazzeo, 1999), but 79% of them performed at or below "basic" on the national writing assessment (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo,. 1999). The findings are corroborated by the annual "Reality Check" surveys, conducted by Public Agenda in association with *Education Week.* When asked to rate recent high school graduates on their "ability to write clearly," some 73% of employers and 75% of college professor; described it a "fair" or "poor"(Public Agenda, 2002).

This unfortunate state of affair in writing achievement is not altogether surprising. There is no question that skilled writing is a highly sophisticated cognitive task because it involves generative thought processes that must be sensitive to the needs and expectations of an audience. To communicate effectively, writers must achieve focus, clarity, and coherence using a suitable style, a meaningful organizational plan, and appropriate conventions. Writer must be reflective and regularly call upon their powers of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In addition, skilled writing requires facility with a wide range of genres and accompanying purposes. Helping students acquire these multifaceted writing competencies is a demanding task for literacy educators. The last three decades have also seen a major shift in the basic way that writing is taught, and this shift presents additional noteworthy challenges for teachers. The focus has changed from evaluating students' written *products* to eliminating the *processes* that writers employ during writing. According to Strickland et al. (2001), "Teachers moved away from merely assigning topics for writing grading papers, and returning them to students with little explanation of how to improve…[T]eachers began to teach about what writer do"(p. 387). As a result, the literacy standards adopted in

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the United States also reflect this fundamental change in the writing curriculum. Public accountability and the challenges of literacy instruction intersect in a way that requires schools not only to provide evidence that significant efforts have been made to teach children to read but also to demonstrate the integrity of their writing instruction. Schools benefit when they can show that (a) writing instruction occurs in an agreed-upon, well-organized, and deliberate manner; (b) teachers actively work at refining their writing pedagogy abilities: and (c) commonly accepted best practices drive a school's writing program (Strickland et al., 2001). The Writing Observation Framework (WOF) described in this article serves these very purposes. The WOF is grounded in the theory and instructional practices of the writing process. In this regard, Voss (2001) found that students who teachers were trained in and used writing process instruction received significantly higher scores on a state-mandated writing assessment. In a similar manner, the 1998 NAEP Writing Assessment (Greenwald et aI., 1999) found that 8th- and 12th-grade students who were always asked to write more than one draft of a paper had higher average scores than their peers who were sometime or never asked 10 do so. Students who saved their writing in a portfolio or folder also had higher average scores than students whose work was not saved.

In the following sections, we present a rationale for the WOF, describe it in detail, and explain how it informs classroom observations and follow-up conferences. We also suggest how it can be meaningfully adapted for several possible uses. We conclude by attempting to put the framework into a proper perspective for literacy professionals.

Why have a Writing Observation Framework?

The WOF was conceived largely in response to the success of the Reading Lesson Observation Framework (RLOF), another recently developed literacy tool (Henk. Moore, Marinak & Tomaselli, 2000). The RLOF is a 60-item instrument that helps an observer rate several key components of a teacher's daily reading lesson, including classroom climate: prereading, during-reading, and postreading phases; skill and strategy instruction: reading materials and tasks; and teacher practices. Since its inception, the RLOF has been used effectively in

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several important ways to improve reading instruction in schools (Henk, 2001), and, as a result we were strongly encouraged to develop a parallel instrument devoted to writing instruction.

With that goal in mind, we set out to create a tool that would clarify, enhance and document writing instruction. In effect, the Writing Observation Framework addresses the same essential purpose as the RLOF, and its uses and benefits are nearly identical. Like it predecessor, the WOF is intended to help improve instruction by (a) encouraging and facilitating a shared philosophy of the writing process and its instruction, (b) ensuring fair and substantive evaluations of teachers' instructional practices in writing, and (e) providing the opportunity to demonstrate teacher and district accountability in writing instruction.

The Writing Observation Framework provide a shared language that improves communication about writing instruction among teachers principal and other supervisors within a school district (Moore, Marinak, & Henk, 2001) and encourages them to reach common ground both philosophically and in practice. This common ground is important because, as Lipson, Mosenthal, Daniels, and Woodside-Jiron (2000) found, individual teachers adapt their writing instruction in a variety of different ways depending on what they believe about teaching and learning. These researchers noted, for instance, that even teachers who value student-centered instruction organized and delivered their writing instruction in substantially different ways. In a similar manner, Brindley and Schneider (2002) found that fourth- grade teachers revealed differences between their perspectives on how writing develops and their instructional practices. By engaging teachers in discussions about aspects of the WOF, school district can promote greater understanding of the writing process and more continuity in its implementation from teacher to teacher and grade to grade. The authors, while working with school districts in the states of Pennsylvania and Illinois, have seen the instrument used for the professional development of new teachers in induction programs and for veteran teachers in peer mentoring and coaching programs.

Because a primary function of the WOF is to be a guide for observing writing instruction, it can also make preobservation and

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follow-up conferences between teachers, principals, and supervisors focused and meaningful. It's structured, yet flexible, format enables strategic and objective critiques of writing instruction that contribute to the professional growth of teachers and often to their evaluators as well.

Still another use has been to document a school's adherence 10 best practices in writing instruction. Used this way, the WOF represents an alternative to standardized test scores as a singular means of demonstrating teacher and district accountability. Strickland et al. (2001) determined that an inordinate amount of the time devoted to professional development on writing in such as preparing student to "write to the state test." Strickland and her colleagues asserted definitively that good test scores are the result of good instruction and that test score< alone should never become the instructional goal.

In essence, the Writing Observation Framework, by facilitating the formation of a much-needed collective philosophy of writing instruction, permits school district to establish expectations for the way teachers conduct daily writing instruction, thus avoiding the narrow focus on test scores. It promotes instructional continuity by organizing and underscoring the major component, and key aspects of a district's preferred writing program, and its straight forward nature and structured format help make these expectations explicit for all shareholders.

Development of the WOF

Item development began by examining books on elementary- and intermediate-level writing published by the lnternational Reading Association (e.g., Cohle & Towle, 200 I; Dahl & Farnan, 1996; Indrisano & Squire, 2000; Morretta & Ambrosini, 2000; Sealey, Sealey. & Millmore. 1979). We focused our energies on exploring sections and chapters that were devoted primarily to the teaching of writing. Important concepts und ideas were logged and then converted into draft item statements. This process produced 64 potential framework items.

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To ensure more complete coverage of the domain, we then surveyed certain classic texts on writing instruction (e.g., Atwell. 1987: Calkin.1986; Graves, 1983) and some of their newer editions (e.g., Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994), a; well as additional professional books and chapters on writing instruction (e.g., Barr & Johnson, 1997; Dyson & Freedman, 1991; Harris & Graham, 1996; Lyons& Pinnell, 2001; McCarrier, Pinnell. & Foumas.1999) and various research syntheses (Calion, 1988; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1985: Wesdorp,1983). At this point, we looked specifically for components and aspects of writing instruction that might have been missed in the initial scan. The number of possible items increased to 78 by the conclusion of this step.

As we examined and reexamined the number and variety of potential framework items, we were confronted with the fact that writing instruction, while similar to reading instruction in a number of respects, also differs quite a bit. Whereas the RLOF had evolved very nicely into a logical and straight-forward observation tool for a single lesson, the WOF did not. We struggled with the difference between whole-group writing instruction and instruction geared for individual learner engaged in various stages of the writing process. As for the writing process itself, we struggled to represent and accommodate its nonlinear, recursive nature. We knew that directing writing instruction across a wide range of authentic situations was problematic, and we were trying to design an instrument that got at the commonalities among them. We wanted to capture the spirit of a classroom infused with writing enthusiasm and effort, and we wanted the instrument to work reasonably well regardless of the context in which writing instruction might occur.

Our e-mail exchanges were frequent and not without disagreement. We worked through our philosophical and practical concepts, and eventually arrived at consensus for each component and aspect. The alterations to the item pool revolved around adding some items, combining others, and deleting several that were regarded as repetitive of lesser importance, or written at an inappropriate level of generality. Once we agreed to the components, we focused on revising items within each component for greater clarity, precision, and utility.

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The instrument then went through several additional versions before we arrived at the formula that appears here.

These subsequent versions occurred as a result of our sharing the WOF with our undergraduate and graduate classes and with experienced literacy educators in public and private schools, colleges, and universities. We interacted with these individuals in their classrooms, at literacy inservice programs, at state and national conferences, and during other professional development events and engagements. Our approach involved asking for feedback and adapting the instrument in those instances that were compelling. This feedback was extremely valuable to us in our decision making. Some of the most notable item suggestions focused on the presence of a common language for writing instruction. Teachers writing alongside their students, and teachers talking about what good writers do.

It was during these formative stage that we decided to field-test the instrument. Three school districts of varying sizes in south-central Pennsylvania were training their administrators in the effective observation and supervision of literacy instruction by using the Reading Lesson Observation Framework. Because it was evident at the time that writing would be an integral aspect of performance on virtually all of Pennsylvania's statewide assessments the three groups of administrators welcome the opportunity to describe, define, and hone the writing instruction that was taking place in their districts classrooms.

The two-year field study used certain aspects of ethnographic research (LeCompte & PreissIe.1993), which included defining what was being observed labeling the category heading in the framework, and creating the specific items within each category of the WOF. Classroom visitation and group discussions among teachers, administrators, and the authors occurred monthly. These highly collaborative interactions with those who would be using the framework were invaluable. For example, it was our field study participants who made it clear early on that because of the recursive nature of the writing process, we could not use before-, during-, and after-writing categories in the WOF as we had done for reading in the RLOF. Through such discussions, many items were added, deleted, and revised. Specific feedback from the field study gave us item such as

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the one about students being encouraged to use a variety of prewriting organizers and the one about the teacher using available technology 10 facilitate writing. On the other hand, several items related to the maintenance of writing samples were deleted from the Teacher Practices category.

When our instrument development process concluded, the WOF contained a total of 60 items. Just as it was with the RLOF, districts that have begun to use the WOF have modified it in various ways to accomplish their own purposes; thus, no formal, follow-up study has been possible.

Description of the instrument

The Writing Observation Framework is presented in the Figure on the following page. At the beginning of the framework, blank spaces are included to indicate the name of the teacher being observed, the evaluator, the school year and date of observation, the observation number and the stages of the writing process that were observed.

The Figure also shows that the WOF consists of nine components. A series of items and aspects fall under each component, and, figuratively speaking, they are each aimed at answering the question "What does effective writing instruction look like from the back of the room?" The following are descriptions of the nine components and their various item and aspects:

- *Classroom climate we* addresses the active promotion and valuing of writing, the use of authentic reading materials as references for writing, the availability of writing tools, the use of a writing process wall chart and editing checklist, the presence of teacher writing samples and purposeful teacher talk, a common language for discussing writing, the teacher as a learner-participant, and the occurrence of classroom social interaction.
- *Prewriting* includes items on writing purposes, continuity with previous lessons, the activation of topical and audience background knowledge, the use of prewriting organizers and

related feedback, the generation of possible language, and the provision of adequate time.

- *Drafting* looks at a teacher's planning, audience awareness, writing tool usage, idea generation, text-structure reminders, format determination, monitoring, feedback and *as*sistance whole-class clarifications, and time allotments.
- *"Conferencing"* targets a teacher's informal and scheduled writing conferences and his other assistance with various stage of writing, peer conferences, teacher- led conferences, revision focuses, and written postconference feedback.
- *Revising* deals with theme and audience focus, alternative language, detail usage. Logical organization, word choice and sentence structure, conventions, writing tools, and time and opponunity to revise.
- *Editing/publishing* focuses on standardized checklists, peer editing, editing conferences, grade- level standards, and the sharing of published writing.
- *Skill/strategy instruction* centers on how a teacher uses direct instruction and explain, models, and scaffolds skills or strategies.
- *Assessment* addresses curricular alignment portfolio and writing folder, and scoring rubrics.
- *Teacher practices* include task appropriateness and relevance student-selected topics, nonlinear instruction, effective time use, sensitivity to diversity, technology, a common language for discussing writing, and integrating language arts instruction.

In using the WOF, the evaluator can mark one of four responses for each item: observed (O), commendation (C), recommendation (R), and not applicable (N). An item or aspect deserves an O response when it is observed and is rated as being of satisfactory quality. When the aspect is of very high quality, it warrants a C response. The R response signifies that an appropriate aspect was either not observed during the visit and should have been or that it was of inadequate quality. Finally, when an aspect is not observed because it was not germane to the lesson, the N response should be given to the item.

We recommend that the evaluator also provide the teacher with an open-ended, written summary of the observation. The observer should first state the overall impression of the instructional episode. As the discussion moves to specific aspects of the writing instruction, it is desirable to focus first on the commendations that were given. Opportunities to offer praise for outstanding work should never be missed, because a positive tone can make the teacher more receptive when the recommendations are addressed. We feel that teachers are always entitled to clear and thorough explanations about aspects of their writing instruction that could be improved. It is also important to comment and elaborate on observed aspects, especially if they have been either missing in previous observations or serve as a synthesis to help refine the teacher's writing pedagogy. The summary should draw comparison with previous observations and serve as a synthesis to help refine the teacher's writing pedagogy.

WOF observations and conferences

The Writing Observation Framework should be used by a principal or reading or language arts supervisor who is watching a classroom teacher provide writing instruction. As with any planned observation, both a pre- and postobservation conference should occur (Radencich, 1995). During the preobservation conference, the teacher should describe the context of the episode the observer will see, as well as share the basic approach to writing instruction and the philosophy that undergirds his or her style of teaching. The teacher should also specify how the instruction connects with preceding and subsequent writing activities and tasks. By preparing the observer for what is likely to transpire during the visit, and by providing materials that will aid the observation, the teacher creates a solid context for the evaluation. In turn, the observer should indicate the components and aspects of writing instruction that will be targeted for review. In future preobservation conferences, the observer should note any new or different aspects of writing instruction that will be addressed or revised.

The WOF offers a range of topics that can be discussed at postobservation conferences. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the communication and the collegiality between the teacher and the

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supervisor will influence whether noteworthy changes in writing instruction occur. As with all professional conferences, the focus should be formative rather than summative in nature. Refining instructional practice should be the goal of all observations using the WOF, and, in this spirit, teachers should not be made to defend themselves. At no point should tallying or summing the items be used as an indication of instructional appropriateness. Such a practice would be inaccurate and a misuse of the instrument. The discussions that surround the WOF should be constructive and aimed at better meeting the writing needs of the students.

In interpreting the WOF, do not expect to find every aspect of writing instruction in a single classroom visit. A large number of observed aspects does not necessarily ensure that effective writing instruction has taken place. An overall observation that is rated as commendable could be marked by the presence of a few or several aspects that are done very well. As with any kind of assessment, multiple observations of instruction will yield the most accurate and complete picture of a teacher's writing pedagogy.

Adapting the WOF

The Writing Observation Framework, as it appears here, should be regarded largely as a working document. Although the instrument represents a solid foundation for many uses, its content can and should be adapted to meet distinctive purposes. Items can be added, deleted, or revised to create a customized framework that matches what districts, schools, grade levels, and even individual teachers would like to see represented in observations of writing instruction. It is expected that different components or items might be highlighted through the adaptation process. Through thoughtful consideration, notions such as developmental appropriateness, the needs of diverse learning populations, and other special teaching situation can be addressed.

The adaptation process is significantly enriched when teachers have a true voice in it. Teacher voice creates ownership—a very desirable attribute for an evaluation instrument of this type. Ownership

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is particularly important because there is probably no more sensitive or central a topic for teachers than their instructional effectiveness.

While the WOF can and should be altered, there is a risk in making the instrument too extensive or overly explicit. If it becomes too prescriptive, creativity can be thwarted and teachers might instruct cautiously or even defensively. A related danger is that the item pool can become unwieldy for teachers and supervisors alike. Should users of the instrument become overwhelmed by it, which is a good possibility given the already large number of items presented here, they may become frustrated or resentful and avoid its use. We recommend that observations be restricted to a small number of WOF components during any one visit in the best interests of both the teacher and the evaluator.

The uses of the instrument can also be varied. For instance, as mentioned previously, it can be a resource for new teacher induction programs. In our experience, new teachers sincerely appreciate the structure and specificity that an observation framework provides. This is especially true for literacy instruction because the stakes are so high. Both the RLOF and WOF allow novice teachers to gain a sense of the expectations to which they will be held. This awareness can be sufficiently reassuring to build their confidence and assist them in their planning. What is most important is that the frameworks can help new teachers get off to an effective start in reading and writing instruction. We also see the WOF being used extensively in peer-mentoring situations. In this context, it provides a common set of criteria for peers to use in observing and coaching one another. It affords a common language and set of understandings that are useful in guiding their dialogues about writing instruction. By the same token, the instrument can be used for in-depth self-evaluation if videotaping is done. Using the tool in this way allows teachers to reflect privately on their writing pedagogy.

One additional usage of the Writing Observation Framework can occur in teacher education contexts. We have already shared the RLOF and WOF in our undergraduate and graduate classes as expedient ways to organize much of the knowledge base for reading and writing instruction. We have found that the instruments usually trigger

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thought-provoking discussions about literacy instruction that include philosophical, theoretical, and applied dimensions. We have also found that, as learners themselves, preservice and inservice teachers value the clarity and structure the instruments offer.

Benefits of the WOF

Like the Reading Lesson Observation Framework, the WOF offers several, significant benefits. The WOF has the potential to facilitate more effective writing instruction by providing common ground for a wide range of literacy professionals within a school district. In part, it increases communication and collaboration among teachers and supervisors by contributing to shared understanding of instructional goals and practices in writing. In fact, the process of determining the criteria for an observation framework represents a valuable team-building exercise in its own right.

A recent publication by the International Reading Association (Irwin, 2002) included the Reading Lesson Observation Framework for use by educators participating in literacy study groups. The Association recommended that "Groups of educators assume responsibility for their own professional growth by creating and sustaining collaborative networks in which they read, write, and reflect on their practice to attain the goal of improving student literacy achievement" (p. 2). We believe that the Writing Observation Framework will be an equally valuable tool for these study groups to use.

The Writing Observation Framework can also play a role in school staff development. The framework can be presented and discussed at inservice meetings as a way of updating teachers, principals, and literacy supervisors about best practices in writing instruction, and it can inspire them to deliberate about what components and items make the most sense for local use. Not only does discussion of the framework stimulate communication and problem solving, but it also does so inexpensively and without consuming large amounts of time. There are limited development costs in terms of money or effort because the version of the WOF provided here offers ample subject matter for participants' consideration and reaction. Perhaps most important is that focused discussion about the

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instrument should help teachers expand their repertoire of instructional strategies for writing, and it should also enable principals to become more informed and, therefore, better able to evaluate teachers' strategy use.

For that matter, we see the WOF as a viable tool for the specialized training of prinicipals. The explicitness of the items contributes to its ease of use; however, not all principals have the requisite background in writing instruction to conduct insightful observations. In these instances, we recommend that those principals and supervisors who possess appropriate experience in literacy observations serve as models and mentors in the use of the instrument for their less-experienced colleagues. This kind of professional development for principals is important because, as Radencich (1995) pointed out, the dynamic and multifaceted nature of literacy and its instruction is difficult to assess during brief classroom visits.

Perhaps the most direct and immediate advantage of the WOF is that it gives teachers the specific feedback they need to improve their writing instruction. They can hone their skills through input received from supervisors and peers, and they can even engage in the aforementioned self-evaluation of their instruction, whether videotaped or not. Used in any of these ways, the framework represents a tool for reflective practice (Duffy-Hester, 1999).

When teachers become reflective about their writing instruction and embrace best writing practices, their WOF profiles will demonstrate their efforts. This documentation can then help schools justify and even showcase their writing programs. It is particularly important in responding to demands of accountability during the current focus on, and pressure of, high-stakes testing. The Writing Observation Framework can provide a formal record of writing events that validates the professional conduct of teachers and, in that way, helps to insulate them from public criticism. While lessening the societal pressure on schools is a worthwhile aim, improving children's writing ability should still be the ultimate goal for using the instrument.

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The WOF in perspective

Our hope in developing the Writing Observation Framework was to help teachers, principals, and language arts supervisors enhance writing instruction in their schools. The instrument is obviously not perfect, especially given the enormous number of different contexts in which writing instruction occurs.

It would be naive to think that literacy professionals could ever agree completely on what should and should not be included. Even though we carefully screened and selected the content for the WOF, certain aspects of literacy instruction might still be regarded as unrepresented, misinterpreted, or overrated. That is precisely why we invite users at all levels to adapt and customize the instrument to their own respective needs.

There are several inherent risks in consolidating the complex domain of writing instruction into a finite set of items. Many ideologies regarding writing instruction exist that cannot be reconciled in anyone set of operating principles or guidelines (Lipson et al., 2000). Likewise, not all of the items that have been included in the WOF reflect what are universally regarded as best practices. For instance, while it is true that many literacy educators and researchers support peer conferencing in writing instruction, there are others who find that the practice can cause problems (Lensmire, 1992; McCarthey, 1990). No framework could realistically address the full range of factors that might have an impact on the effectiveness of writing instruction and, at the same time, remain functional.

Using a definite set of guidelines to evaluate the teaching of writing also begs the question of oversimplification. Our intent is not to reduce the intricate processes of writing instruction to a simple checklist but rather to provide a straightforward way for literacy professionals to bring greater clarity and organization to the teaching of writing in their unique educational contexts. The WOF does not pretend to be a comprehensive template for effective writing instruction in all situations. Neither is it an attempt to promote rigid uniformity of writing instruction for the sake of accountability. We recognize that practices might be applied very differently depending

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upon the teacher, the classroom, and the students. There are almost certainly effective aspects of instruction that have not been included in the instrument. These omissions might include practices that are typically regarded as unorthodox or archaic, yet still manage to promote learning when skillfully executed by the right teacher.

To our way of thinking, knowledgeable and thoughtful users of the Writing Observation Framework will bring common sense and openmindedness to bear in interpreting its results. In sum, despite the limitations inherent in a tool of this type, we think the tangible benefits to children and literacy professionals outweigh its ideological risks. The reading and writing observation frameworks do not offer much in the way of fresh or original insights into literacy instruction. Instead, their value derives from pulling together and organizing generally accepted principles of best practices in reading and writing instruction and formatting the information in an instructive and useful way. To the extent that children benefit from better literacy instruction, the observation frameworks will have served their primary purpose.

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