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Assessing children's emerging literacy through anecdotal records

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Assessing children's emerging literacy through anecdotal records

Abstract

Implementing the whole language concept into an instructional program involves a change in the assessment of student growth. With the focus on student involvement in the language processes to nurture language abilities, the traditional formal measures, usually standardized tests, are inappropriate. They report in quantitative terms a child's mastery of language fragments. Little information is acquired about how a child creates meaning within the structure of a whole unit--a story or poem

Assessing Children's Emerging Literacy
Through Anecdotal Records

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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by
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Implementing the whole language concept into an instructional program involves a change in the assessment of student growth. With the focus on student involvement in the language processes to nurture language abilities, the traditional formal measures, usually standardized tests, are inappropriate. They report in quantitative terms a child's mastery of language fragments. Little information is acquired about how a child creates meaning within the structure of a whole unit--a story or poem.

Informal techniques that are qualitative, or descriptive, can lend insight into a child's approach to learning and his/her emerging literacy. Assessments, in the form of anecdotal records kept by the teacher, can reveal a student's progress in the learning process.

In reporting student progress, anecdotal records can replace a grading system. Traditional grading systems do not describe a student's abilities; rather they report a student's ability to master fragmented skills and are usually supported by standardized tests scores, or quantitative measures.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of descriptive instruments, particularly anecdotal records, in assessing and reporting children's emergent language. These anecdotal records will be utilized in a multi-grade classroom

of fourth- and fifth-grade students as they engage in the writing process. They will be referred to in the student-teacher evaluation, the student self-evaluation, and the periodic reporting to parents.

Review of Literature

Much attention is currently being given to the assessment of the language processes through informal measurements that describe a student's behavior within the language processes: The professional journals abound with articles, and many sessions on this topic are presented at conferences. Pearson and Valencia (1987) state that within the different levels of decision-making, many unique assessment techniques are available. Indrisano (1990) relates that whatever the techniques employed, the classroom teacher's observations of a child's responses within the processes and in conferences bring student performance closer to student potential.

Informal assessment depends on the teacher and the student accepting collaborative roles in gathering information about the student's responses. This data can be used later to guide instruction. With an active partnership between the teacher and the student, this process can be described as diagnostic teaching (Indrisano, 1990). Pearson and Valencia (1987) agreeing with Indrisano relate that assessment should not drive instruction, as it often does in many American schools, but

assessment and instruction must be so interwoven as to be indistinguishable from one another.

Au, Scheu, Kawakami, and Herman (1990) say that in a holistic approach to language instruction, the main purpose of assessment should be to provide teachers, students, and parents with useful information to promote the growth of a student's literacy. Yetta Goodman (1989) relates that many opportunities arise to discuss evaluations with a student and to gain an individual student's perspective into his/her approach to learning. Using the information gained in these discussions, the teacher and the student can plan for the learning experiences that expand on previous learning and prior knowledge.

Teacher anecdotal records provide information leading to meaningful dialogue among the teacher, the student, as well as administrators and parents in respect to planning a student's instructional program. Anecdotal records provide information about the ongoing progress of the child at various times throughout the school year (Flood and Lapp, 1989). Daily observations of a child's involvement in the writing process offer more validity to the assessment process, for a teacher can make many observations daily throughout the school year, contributing to a representative sample of the student's behaviors (Moore, 1983). Marek (1984) suggests that keeping these informal records allows teachers to evaluate a student's

progress in a non-threatening way, note changes and growth in language development and other areas, utilize information for parent-teacher conferences without needing extra interpretations, maintain a readily available tool of assessment, and review more aspects of development than standardized tests can assess.

Anecdotal records can also be gathered during teacher-student conferences. The teacher begins the conference sitting side by side with the student at a table or desk, thereby taking the role of an advocate. Then both the teacher and the student can feel at ease and offer ideas and suggestions concerning the writing piece being discussed (Johnston, 1987). The student and the teacher can confer on what items are included in the anecdotal record, often listing items representing a student success, weaknesses discovered, and other items of interest.

Marek (1984) suggests guidelines and procedures for using anecdotal records in conferences. A teacher in keeping this kind of record should include the date, the setting, who was involved, what happened, and the responses of those involved. Indrisano (1990) provides procedures for keeping anecdotal records on file cards or in folders while gathering information during individual and small-group conferences. These procedures may vary from teacher to teacher and must of necessity be a

form and procedure that works for each individual teacher's teaching style.

Pearson and Valencia (1987) conclude that if the responsibility for assessment and decision-making for instruction is placed with the individual teacher in partnership with the student, the result will produce more capable, concerned teachers and more informed, motivated students.

Implementation of Anecdotal Records to Assess Writing Abilities

Anecdotal records were initiated to describe students' progress in developing writing abilities. They were utilized by the teacher in observing students, in conducting student-teacher conferences, in recording student self-evaluations, and in reporting student progress to parents. Anecdotal records became a part of the district assessment program that included standardized testing, writing folders, and portfolios of writing pieces. Because anecdotal records can become a time consuming activity, they were used only to assess writing in the language arts block.

The implementation of anecdotal records during and following student-teacher conferences provides regular evaluation of a student's progress on a given writing piece and within the writing process. Short abbreviated notes are kept by the teacher concerning topic, sentence structure, mechanics,

behavior in the writing process, and the conference. Notes by the student can also be included in the teacher notebook or in the student's own journal. This author recorded in Student A's journal, "2/5/92 Student A, This piece shows good use of the elements of a mystery. Reading all those mysteries has certainly paid off for you. I'm having trouble getting a mental picture of the character Todd. Can you?"

During a conference, the teacher listens and observes the student carefully, allowing the student to lead the discussion of the writing piece. The teacher acts as advocate, advisor, and helper, not as leader. Interest here is in the writing process not necessarily the written product, or outcome. The student and teacher are doing a descriptive, ongoing assessment of whole units, not a bit by bit evaluation of individual skills acquired. While the teacher takes notes during the conference he/she does not write on the student's writing piece. The student handles the written corrections, changes, or editing that is discussed. Notes taken by the teacher may indicate that more instruction in certain areas is needed, thereby inferring a certain need for materials and lessons for following days. The most important element of this conference is how active the child is in taking charge of his/her own learning.

The actual note-taking can be accomplished in several ways: in a loose-leaf or a spiral notebook, on sticky notes,

file cards, or wide address labels. This author prefers to take most notes on large oversized computer address labels. The structure for the recording includes the student's name, the date of the conference, the title of piece shared, and what was discussed at the conference is recorded in a cursive manner. This author noted on a computer address label concerning Student A: "10/22/91 Student A's piece, 'Sorry Puppy', exhibited use of quotation marks in conversation, good spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing including indentation. Characterization development continues. Teacher introduced using a thesaurus. Student indicated piece needed further work. Student very pleased with piece." The label is then transferred to a spiral notebook in which each student has been assigned several pages. These sections are designated by tabs labeled with students' names, in alphabetical order. Often notes are handwritten onto the page during preparation time or after school. The teacher needs to make a conscious effort to be concise but yet informative concerning each entry.

Observation notes also need to be entered into the spiral notebook. These can be entered onto a label or right onto the notebook page. The notes are written as the teacher observes the student writing independently or with other students during the writing time or in other areas of the curriculum during the day. Often these observations help the teacher

to understand why some skills are being used and others are not. Observations are made not just on skill usage but also on social interaction, amount of time on task, actions interfering with completion of the task, student behavior, and student commitment to goals. This author observed and noted the following:

"12/9/91 Student A chose to work independently during writing workshop, spent 15 minutes in silent thought, wrote a list of ideas in journal and visited library, returning with 4 books on caring for pets." Observation is an invaluable tool that is often overlooked in the rush to accomplish every objective set up by the district.

Another notebook page is used to record the skills that need teacher instruction to the class, small groups, or individuals. These skills often are brought to the teacher's attention as conferences are being conducted. By making a list in the spiral notebook, the teacher can present the needed learning experiences.

A checklist of writing mechanics is included in each student's writing folder. This sheet lists the writing skills that students acquire during the school year. As the student exhibits the use of a particular skill, it is checked off the list, and the date is noted. This procedure allows the student to take responsibility for his/her own learning. By including this checklist in the conference, students are reminded of what

they already know and are expected to exhibit in their writing and what they need to learn. This author uses the following checklist (Strub, unpublished):

WRITING REVISIONS

CAPITALIZATION:

Beginning sentences

Titles

Proper nouns

PUNCTUATION:

End of sentence

Serial

Possessives

Contractions

Quotations

Abbreviations

SENTENCES:

Clear, accurate sentences

Agreement of subject and verb

Varying sentence lengths

Different kinds of sentences

WORDS:

Strong, accurate verbs

Cautious use of adjectives and adverbs

Pronouns

Prepositions

Conjunctions

Interjections

Plurals

Possessives

Contractions

SPELLING:

HANDWRITING:

PLACEMENT ON PAGE:

Margins

Indentations

Letters

Poetry

Student-teacher conferences are a valuable time for promoting positive student-teacher interaction. Often students are more apt to converse with a teacher in the more informal atmosphere of a one-on-one, side by side conference. The two become partners in a task that can be enjoyed by both parties. It is not uncommon for the teacher to ask the student to respond to one of the teacher's compositions, asking for input and advice from the student. This author asked a student to confer on a diamante poem she had written. The student suggested a new second line. The finished poem with the student's suggestion is as follows:

Squirrels

Playing together

Flying through the trees

Two chattering and taunting

Growling and barking

Hackles raised

Pierre

These conferences are an excellent opportunity for the student and teacher to set goals for further writing, revision, and publishing. This author noted the following: "2/3/92 Student A published her fourth fictional piece today. We decided she will choose a topic that she wants to learn about and do research on it. Her goal is to write a nonfiction piece." Students need to be responsible for their own learning and must be involved in setting their educational goals. By doing so at these conferences, goals can be established, reviewed, revised, and celebrated by both the teacher and the student when realized.

Self-assessment is an important part of a student's education. Learning to be responsible for his/her own continued learning is a large part of becoming a lifelong learner. This self-assessment can take place in many ways, such as learning logs, journals, and diaries kept by the student, letters to the teacher or parents, and progress reports on themselves. The student is the best judge of his/her accomplishments and

weaknesses. They should be allowed to express their wants and needs.

Anecdotal notes should be enclosed on any writing piece that is included in the showcase writing portfolio, the collection of selected compositions kept by the district. The notes should be written by the student and the teacher. These notes should indicate why this piece was chosen; who chose it (student or teacher); when it was written; where in the process is the piece--finished or in progress; how the teacher assisted in the writing process; and how much time was spent on the piece. Examples of this type of anecdotal records from this author's classroom are: "Student A. I picked this piece because it was my best writing in fourth grade. I finished it on March 11 after a lot of revision. I spent two weeks working on this piece." Teacher's record: "Student A spent two weeks working on this piece with great determination and care to revisions with little adult assistance. She chose this finished piece and it is representative of her writing abilities at this time. March 13, 1992." These notes give teachers and parents much more insight into the piece than can be gained by merely reading the piece.

Anecdotal records from student-teacher conferences are invaluable when reporting to parents. This author shares the pages in her spiral notebook with students and parents during

conferences. This procedure allows parents to join the partnership and to share in the day by day progress of the child, to review instructional goals, to celebrate accomplishments, and to help strengthen weak areas. This author also reviews the anecdotal records kept in the spiral notebook with students when completing report cards at the end of the quarter.

Conclusion

Administrators, Boards of Education, parents, and teachers are all seeking better ways of communicating children's learning. Standardized tests are only one small way to do this. The utilization of anecdotal records by classroom teachers is a much more effective tool for communicating this progress. Anecdotal records are extremely positive tools for visualizing growth in the writing process. The anecdotal record allows students opportunities for self-evaluation.

Assessment is a timely issue in education today. Educators are searching for a better means of accountability--anecdotal records are an answer to their search. Anecdotal records are the assessment of the future; responsible educators must make them the assessment of today!

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