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Portfolio assessment of children's reading growth

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Abstract

The teaching of reading has taken a dramatic turn in the last two decades because emerging literacy is seen in a more holistic light. This concept of literacy, known as whole language, focuses on students creating their own meaning through the language processes. When educators engage in instructional development to extend the whole language concept into the school program, they consider the nature of language and emerging literacy. With this view of language in mind, reading does not simply mean decoding words but is a far more complex process. Reading is building meaning by integrating prior knowledge with new information presented by an author (Valencia, Pearson, Peters, & Wixson, 1989).

Portfolio Assessment

of Children's Reading Growth

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The teaching of reading has taken a dramatic turn in the last two decades because emerging literacy is seen in a more holistic light. This concept of literacy, known as whole language, focuses on students creating their own meaning through the language processes. When educators engage in instructional development to extend the whole language concept into the school program, they consider the nature of language and emerging literacy. With this view of language in mind, reading does not simply mean decoding words but is a far more complex process. Reading is building meaning by integrating prior knowledge with new information presented by an author (Valencia, Pearson, Peters, & Wixson, 1989).

Skill-based programs that teach phonetic decoding as the primary reading strategy have been found to bring shallow results (Valencia, 1990). Many teachers are moving from this traditional approach to a more interactive, dynamic one that emphasizes the empowerment of children to create their own meaning through their involvement in the language processes (Lindaman & Lewis, 1989).

To create meaning, process must be emphasized over form (Cambourne, 1988). Wixson and Peters (1987) state, "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation" (p. 333). While the interactive view of reading centers on how readers construct meaning from text,

reading tests do not focus on complex reasoning, which is the essence of comprehension, but considers right vs. wrong (Wixson & Peters, 1987). In assessing children's involvement in the reading process, many different samples of their responses need to be collected. Emerging literacy needs to be described rather than quantified.

Purpose of the Paper

This paper will focus on portfolio assessment as a means of describing children's growth and instructional needs in the area of reading. A rationale for the qualitative assessment of reading will be presented. Then ways to implement portfolio assessment will be offered.

Rationale for

Qualitative Assessment of Reading

The whole language concept focuses on learning through involvement in the language processes. In respect to reading, students bring their own meaning to text (Smith, 1988). By associating their own experiences with the text, students can participate in the interactive process to create meaning. Then, the emphasis in the instructional program is on student empowerment rather than teacher-directed learning experiences (Fagan, 1989). Children learn how to respond in the reading process through their own exploration and the modeling of school and community associates. Through interacting with others

concerning their reading experiences, children can learn a great deal about language (Cambourne, 1988).

Need for Qualitative Assessment

With this change in the emphasis of language arts programs, based on the nature of language and emerging literacy, a need emerges to review student assessment. John Harker (1990) reflects on traditional quantitative methods, standardized tests, by saying they ". . . remain locked in a concept of reading which does not coincide with current knowledge of the reading process" (p. 38). What is being taught is not being assessed by quantitative testing procedures (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Many advances have been made in methodology, but little change has occurred in reading tests (Farr & Carey, 1986). Seeing reading as a dynamic interactive process calls for a realignment in the assessment schema (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990).

Problems with Quantitative Measurement

In developing techniques to assess the reading abilities of students in instructional programs based on the whole language concept, the difference between assessment and testing must be differentiated. "Assessment means gathering information to meet diverse needs . . . . Testing, by contrast, refers to one particular method for obtaining information about learning." (Teale, Hiebert, & Chittenden, 1987, p. 773) Therefore, assessment is seen as an on-going process, whereby testing

involves one measure of a particular skill at a single sitting (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, & Herman, 1990).

Testing does not take into account whether the student is having a bad day or whether the test item was understood. Assessment, on the other hand, uses many performance-based and observational methods for gathering data and is more comprehensive in scope (Flood & Lapp, 1989). Farr (1992) relates, "Assessment focuses on what real literacy means and the awareness that various groups have a stake in helping students to develop as literate citizens" (p. 28).

Au et al. (1990) relate, "The process of moving from a skills-oriented approach to a whole literacy approach raises many issues, but assessment and accountability are among the most troublesome" (p. 574). Traditionally, the testing of students' involvement in the process of reading has had a narrow skills emphasis rather than a more broad one--that of assessing readers' understanding of underlying meaning of the text. Farr (1992) further states, "Most published tests have not adequately responded to emerging reading theory, which explains reading comprehension as a meaning-constructing process" (p. 31). The reading that is required on most standardized tests is not the reading that children engage in. Most methods try to eliminate the effect of background information from test items, which is now

seen as one of the most important elements in reading comprehension (Harker, 1990).

Another problem is that tests often rely on contrived passages that are puzzling and inconsistent rather than using authentic passages from literature (Tierney et al., 1991). Students have great difficulty bringing meaning to these passages; as a result, the test does not accurately measure their true achievement. A high score on a standardized reading test does not indicate that the student is functionally literate. The results mean that students can do the limited tasks offered in the test (Farr, 1992).

Tests often measure only literal comprehension rather than inferential understanding. Good readers infer meaning from text but receive no credit from it on traditional reading tests (Flood & Lapp, 1989).

Tests compare students with other students. They do not accurately reflect students' achievement, for they fail to compare students' responses to their own past performance (Valencia et al., 1989).

Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Growth

The way to assess students' reading achievement has been elusive at best for educators. No single method of assessment is sufficiently valid or reliable so that it alone can form the basis of evaluation. Valencia et al. (1989) relate, "Clearly, reading

assessment must be reconceptualized" (p. 59). Testing isolated skills offers little insight into student's true ability. Wolf (1989) states, "Much school based assessment actually prevents students from becoming thoughtful respondents to, and judges of their own work" (p. 35).

The assessment of reading must be ongoing, for it is multidimensional. Each bit of evidence adds a piece to the puzzle in describing children's reading progress (Valencia, 1990). Their reading performance must be assessed while they are engaged in the language processes: Reading comprehension abilities should be ascertained as children are engaged in a meaningful reading experience (Farr, 1992).

Teachers have often been frustrated when they entered into parent-teacher conferences with information about children's growth and needs based only on their intuition. With the implementation of the whole language concept into the reading instructional program, teachers have had to face a worse dilemma in assessment, for the traditional tests, based on isolated skills presented out of context, do not assess the dynamic process of reading. Teachers needed a holistic approach to assessment, one that would accurately reflect the students' abilities yet provide parents and administrators with concrete evidence of students' growth (Johns, 1990).

Parents often see report card grades as a definitive evaluation of their children's achievement. For example, parents who see their child receiving a "C" in reading term after term may believe that he/she is making little progress. While the teachers know that this may not be true, it is difficult to communicate that to the parents through a report card (Flood & Lapp, 1989).

Value of Portfolios in Reading Assessment

A portfolio is a systematic collection of a student's classroom activity. They have long been used by artists and models to show work samples to prospective employers. In the same way, students can develop portfolios containing samples of their involvement in the reading process (Tierney et al., 1991). Portfolios are not collections of each week's graded papers but a thoughtful and systematic collection of representative work throughout the year (Johns, 1990).

Several advantages have been found for portfolios, not the least of which is that they change the mindset in evaluation (Goodman, 1989). No longer is a student being graded in comparison to other students but for what he/she is achieving (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). Valencia (1990) states that portfolios, "resonate with our desire to capture and capitalize on the best each student has to offer" (p. 338).

Students and teachers can view the assessment as a collaboration rather than a task to be done for others.

Assessment through portfolios becomes something done by students instead of done to students (Paulson et al., 1991). Valencia (1990) further states, "Collaborative assessment strengthens the bond between student and teacher and establishes them as partners in learning" (p. 338). Students and their teachers can work together to establish this collection and then collaboratively use it to determine students' progress and further teacher instruction and student activity (Johnson, 1984).

Portfolio assessment challenges students to focus more directly on their responsibility for learning by providing authentic opportunities to criticize one's own work. Herter (1991) states that portfolios encourage self-reflection and invite students to assume control over their progress. Students assume responsibility for learning by seeing their own strengths and weaknesses through a portfolio review with the teacher (Stayter & Johnson, 1987). Students are able to compare work done earlier in the year with work done more currently.

Teachers can encourage students' self-reflection by asking them to order their best to least effective work in their folder and then posing to them questions such as suggested by Rief (1990):

1. Why is this your best?

2. How did you go about creating it?

3. What problems did you have?

4. How did you solve those problems?

(Rief, 1990)

As a result, students become active in their own learning.
"Involving students in the evaluation process in this way focuses
the students' attention on their own growth" (Stayter & Johnson,
1987). Portfolios become self-reflective and concentrate on the
meta-cognitive value of that process. They allow teachers to see
what a student values and why.

Portfolios also offer a more accurate reflection of the
student's achievement than traditional evaluation methods.
"Researchers have continued to disagree about reading tests'
ability to measure, or even identify separate comprehension
skills" (Joels & Anderson, 1988, p. 179). Since artifacts
included in a portfolio are part of instruction and not fabricated
tests, they are realistic measures of what is going on in the
classroom (Moore, 1983). They offer many opportunities for the
teacher to observe a whole array of literacy abilities, not just
one or two isolated examples (Valencia et al., 1989).

<center>Implementation of Portfolios into the</center>

<center>Instructional Program</center>

A portfolio can be compiled in many ways. Wolf (1989) and
Rief (1990) believe that in order for the student to have
"ownership" of the literacy experience, the portfolio contents
should be entirely the student's choice. "As teachers/learners,

we have to believe in the possibilities of our students by trusting them to show us what they know and valuing what they are able to do with that knowledge" (Rief, 1990, p. 26). By allowing a student complete authority, they will not receive the benefit of the teacher's knowledge of the literacy process (Tierney et al., 1991).

Some schools have prescribed elements for the portfolio that are collected for each child. For example, each student is evaluated by norm-referenced tests, informal criterion-referenced tests, two writing samples, and voluntary reading program reports (Flood & Lapp, 1989). From Valencia et al.'s perspective (1989), this approach defies the advantages of individualistic portfolio assessment. "To be valid, assessment should provide students with multiple opportunities to apply their reading skills to a variety of tasks" (p. 59).

Some districts in using portfolios for assessment have established specific guidelines to grade the portfolio (Simmons, 1990; Krest, 1990). If grades are assigned to students' work in their portfolios, they become quantitative in nature and lead to the problem of traditional evaluation methods. If grades are assigned, once again students are being compared with each other (Valencia, 1990).

Valencia (1990) recommends guidelines for selecting materials for portfolios that facilitate the whole language

concept. They are: authentic work, continuous examples
throughout the year, multidimensional scope, and collaborative
selection by student and teacher (Valencia, 1990). As the
exhibits are collected for the portfolios, teachers are given
opportunities to re-evaluate their teaching methods and curriculum
goals (Au et al., 1990).

Most experts agree on several items that can be included in
portfolios to extend qualitative assessment (Valencia, 1990;
Tierney et al., 1991; Rief, 1990):

1. Dated samples of students' writing about literature
selected by the teacher as being representative of daily
work--These writings can assess internalization of specific
reading abilities, such as main idea and character analysis.

2. Examples of students' extensions of reading experiences
through various means of expression

3. Students' writing in the content area showing growth in
comprehension of content material

4. A list of self-selected books compiled by students to
show their reading activity (specific works and different
genres)

5. Students' self-assessment of their reading and writing
in narrative form

6. Reading journal entries in which students respond to material that reveals their literal and inferential comprehension abilities

7. Optional selections--special projects (or photographs of the projects), anecdotal records, audio tapes of oral reading throughout the year, or any other information that would portray students' reading growth

Portfolios of this magnitude saved for each student in each of his/her elementary school years would require a new addition to the school building just to store them. It would also be a huge task for the next year's teacher to read all of the exhibits. At the end of each school year, teachers can edit portfolios with the assistance of the students and can save at least three but not more than five items that are representative of the student's work. Also, teachers can include a brief summary of each student's responses and progress over the past school year. The items remaining from the culling at the end of the year can be bound as a memory book for the parent (Valencia, 1990).

Portfolios have great potential for the assessment and monitoring of students' literacy development. However, they need to be carefully initiated as an integral part of the school program (Johns, 1990). First, resistance to something new replacing traditional evaluation methods can cause concern among educators and the public. For example, the legislators and other

members of the public may be calling for accountability while educators see the limitations of traditional methods of assessment (Valencia et al., 1989). Therefore, the educational community is charged with properly explaining naturalistic assessment.

Second, portfolio assessment represents a major shift in classroom practices and requires a great deal of teacher time to thoughtfully implement in the classroom (Johns, 1990). Administrators need to provide inservice time to prepare teachers for this new method and to provide support, alleviating stress during the changeover.

Third, many teachers are afraid that the problems and stress inherent in change are not worth the benefits. The benefits of using portfolios are, however, real and need to be addressed (Johns, 1990).

<center>Summary</center>

Qualitative assessment is one means of implementing the whole language concept into an instructional program. Such programs focus on students' engaging in the language processes to create meaning and then reflecting on their responses to further establish goals for their learning. Portfolios, as ongoing collections of students' responses, have much potential for describing reading growth, for offering collaborative assessment opportunities to students and teachers, and for presenting evidence to parents of their children's language growth.

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