Assessment Conversations

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In theory, assessment is about gathering and interpreting data to inform action. In practice, data interpretations are constrained by our views of literacy and students, the assessment conversations that surround us, and the range of "actions" we can imagine. When I wrote this column a very capable kindergarten teacher explained to me why she had sent three students to be assessed for learning disabilities. She did so (a) because of pressure from first-grade teachers to retain students who were "not far enough along" and (b) because the administration opposed retention. Another teacher commented, "These children have such language deficits and there's no language in the home." A third teacher wished her faculty "could discuss retention and realistic expectations for grade levels without the nastiness and accusations." These assessment conversations are predictable fallout from a high-stakes testing environment and part of the reason for the International Reading Association's (1999) concerns about such practices. We cannot allow ourselves these conversations any more than we can allow their equivalents in our classrooms. They prevent learning, limit problem solving, and build unproductive relationships and identities.

There are better assessment conversations. First-grade teachers in a local high-poverty urban school asked me to their weekly grade-level meeting to help think through a problem. Each teacher had a group of children who seemed "unable to move from level E books," even though the students' journals indicated they had the necessary print knowledge. The teachers' systematic records and regular Wednesday afternoon (data-based) meetings allowed them to identify the problem. Their conversation assumed that each person was working hard to provide the best instruction for his or her students. This belief allowed them to describe the problem in terms of professional practice and children's progress, rather than student, community, or colleague deficiencies, and to seek collegial support for alternatives. The teachers drew on multiple sources of information and understood the advantage of other sets of eyes for overcoming the limitations of their own assessment lens, inviting one another (and me, an outsider) into their classrooms to seek more solutions.

These assessment strategies, documenting and collaboratively analyzing data, will help them achieve their goals of improving their teaching and reducing achievement differences among groups of students—the primary goals of assessment (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994). These are also the stated goals of high-stakes testing. However, the tests provide no useful or timely information to help teachers accomplish such goals, and they encourage an interactional climate that can undermine them.

Assessment That Improves Learning

Noticing and recording literate knowledge and practice. Teachers' ability to make productive sense of (and record) children's literate behavior is the central component of assessment. This means, for example, noticing the strategies children use to figure out a word, and their appeals for verification. It means realizing that the appeals indicate they are monitoring their read-

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ing, and that the next step might be helping to integrate multiple cue sources. It means recognizing what a child's *kycke* (cake) indicates about his or her knowledge of phonemic structure (all sounds sequentially, if not conventionally, represented) and orthographic structure (predictable patterns—*ck*, marker *e*). This knowledge informs the moment-to-moment decisions of adaptive teaching—knowing what a child can almost do, can do independently or in collaboration, or understands incompletely. Recognizing these patterns focuses instruction. It also allows us to reflect an image of competence and agency by revealing to learners what they are doing well, and it balances the high-stakes testing central focus on attending to what less capable students are *not* doing well.

Assessment requires uncovering the sense children make of literacy and literacy instruction. For example, a fourth grader once explained to me that a good writer "writes fast" and good readers are "all the kids that are quiet...they just listen...they get chapter books." She said she doesn't converse with other students about their writing because she "wouldn't want to hurt their feelings" or to give them "things that you thought of in your head" because then they'd "probably have the same stories" (Johnston, Jiron, & Day, 2001, p. 226). These conceptions influence her engagement in classroom literate practices. Our goal is to teach children to view themselves as engaged readers and writers and to show them that literacy is more about social action and meaning making than about recognizing and writing words accurately (though it also involves that).

Revealing knowledge and practice. Noticing what children know and can do, and how they understand literacy, is easier when their literate learning is accessible (visible and audible). This means that children need to read and write a lot and to talk about doing so in ways that provide information about their development. We normalize conversations with questions like "What problems are you encountering today?" (assuming all readers and writers do encounter them). This raises the possibility of discussing solution strategies: "How did you solve that problem?" "How else could it be figured out?" "How did you know to do it that way?" Such discussions make children's confusions and strategic thinking accessible, providing evidence of their problem solving and stimulating a sense of literate agency. Collaborative literacy practices also make literate thinking available. When it is normal for children to ask questions of texts and engage one another with ideas about the texts they read and write, their comprehension processes are made accessible in a way they are not with retellings and closed questions.

Analyzing the learning context. To optimize instruction requires assessing the classroom learning environment. When a group of children fails to thrive in a classroom, it is likely that some aspect of instruction is not functioning optimally for those children—perhaps limited book access (physical access, time, difficulty, cultural relevance) or lack of instructional attention to independence-building strategies like cross checking. Frameworks derived from successful instruction can provide helpful assessment lenses (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993). However, there is always the temptation to ascribe difficulties to limitations in children (e.g., language processing limitations, learning disabilities), particularly when we are under public accountability pressure. While such limitations can exist, there are good reasons to curb such explanations.

First, one-to-one adaptive instruction can generally overcome learning difficulties (Vellutino & Scanlon, 2002). Second, such limitations are too easily confused with cultural differences. Third, merely viewing children through a disability lens can diminish our teaching. For example, Lyons (1991) described a successful Reading Recovery teacher who was unsuccessful with one student. Detailed records of the boy's literate behavior did not help the teacher adapt instruction. She viewed the child as learning disabled and interpreted his data differently from that of other students, so her instructional

responses maintained his disabling behaviors. When a colleague drew the discrepancies in interpretation and instructional interaction to her attention, the teacher altered her instruction and accelerated the student's learning.

Assessing a learning context is not easy. First, we run the risk of discovering a glitch in our teaching and feeling the burden of responsibility. Second, the same assumptions that underlie our teaching underlie our assessment, creating blind spots. Sometimes a different set of eyes and ears—a different perspective—is necessary to circumvent the unconscious assumptions we inevitably carry about different kinds of students. Sometimes the eyes might belong to trusted colleagues whose theories or cultural experiences are different. Sometimes video or audiotape provides sufficient distance to align our learning theories with our teaching practice.

Productive Assessment Conversations

Assessment to improve instruction requires active learning communities that sustain productive conversations about teaching and learning that are based on data. As in the classroom, the conversations cannot be about who is more or less competent but about how to make teaching, learning, and interpretations better. Just as we want children to ask questions of texts and engage with one another's ideas about those texts, we want our assessment data to produce these conversations about teaching and learning. As in the classroom, difference in perspective is critical; it produces the disjunctures that reveal what is taken for granted and allows us, in a trusting environment, to view literacy and instructional environments with depth of vision.

Our assessments of children, as we enact them in our classrooms, are part of the intellectual environment into which they will grow (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, the features of literate behavior on which we focus, and our interpretations of them, have consequences. We cannot afford assessment conversations that shrink our view of a child's promise and invite unproductive instructional practices and literate identities—or that reduce the richness of the literacy we teach, regardless of the pressures to do so.

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