

9 Assessing Literacy Practices

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Introduction

Recent research on assessment would suggest that assessment information can be used to enhance pupil achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.* 2003; Clarke, 2001). Evidence from this research has identified the nature of the interactions between teachers and pupils within these assessments as key to their success. Do the interactions provide opportunities for teachers to make the success criteria explicit to students? Do they provide opportunities for students to reveal what it is they know and can do, so that teachers may build on this to provide appropriate feedback to pupils? Perhaps one of the most critical factors to examine is whether the interactions enable pupils to engage actively with the feedback to improve subsequent work. This paper examines the opportunities for pupil participation in, and engagement with, literacy assessment practices. In order to situate this kind of assessment practice, different purposes for assessment are identified. The nature of assessment practice that is likely to enhance pupils' literacy development is then outlined. The paper concludes with a summary of the issues, and the implications these raise for practice.

Purposes for Assessment

Assessment purposes may be identified by categories that include summative assessment, diagnostic assessment and formative assessment. Wiliam (1998) suggests that these terms do not describe assessment but rather the use to which information arising from the assessment is put. Each of these categories relate to pupil learning, but it is the nature of that relationship that influences the extent to which assessment information could be used to enhance pupil achievement in a given area. Black & Wiliam (1998) have been credited with introducing the terms 'assessment *of* learning' and 'assessment *for* learning' to distinguish between summative and formative assessment. On the one hand, they consider

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assessment information being used to give an account of a pupil's achievements in a given area at a given point (summative); on the other hand, they describe assessment information may be used to make decisions that enable pupils to enhance their learning and achievement (formative). It could be argued that diagnostic assessment is a sub-set of both.

Summative and formative assessment are concerned not just with a minority of pupils who are under-achieving, but with all pupils. These assessments are the responsibility of the classroom teacher.

Therefore, any assessment information could be used summatively or, formatively; perhaps less so diagnostically given the specific information needed from these assessments; but formative assessment should also yield specific context-relevant information that the learner can use to move forward. If, on the other hand, as Filer (2000) argues, assessment is conducted *on, by and for inherently social actors*, then we need to acknowledge the context in which these assessments occur and the ways in which the actors (pupils) in the assessment mediate its practice, including the purposes for the assessment, as perceived by them.

Summatively assessing pupils means identifying, recording and reporting where the pupil is right now in terms of her literacy development. It means documenting this pupil's achievements and what s/he can do at this point in time. This kind of assessment information used summatively may be norm-referenced or criterion-referenced, but it nevertheless documents what the pupil can do in relation to constructs defined by others. Summative assessment information typically includes information yielded from standardised tests such as the Drumcondra Primary Reading Tests (DPRT) (Educational Research Centre, 1997) and Micra-T (Wall & Burke, 1991) reading tests.

Examples of assessments that are used to provide diagnostic information are Neale Analysis test (Neale *et al.*, 1997), Mist/Forward Together (Hannavy, 1993) and Aston Index Profile (Newton *et al.*, 1972). It is intended that data from these assessments will inform individualised reading/writing programmes for particular pupils. Results from these tests give evidence of pupils' strengths and weaknesses in particular reading and writing skills. They also yield insights into the strengths and weaknesses of these pupils' reading strategies that, in turn, can inform how best to help these pupils improve.

Using assessment information formatively is understood to mean that information from routine classroom interactions, whether 'planned' or 'interactive' (Cowie & Bell, 1999), will be used to feed forward directly into the future teaching and learning in that class. This may be at whole-class, small group or individual level. This, therefore, is the assessment

purpose most closely bound up with teachers' routine classroom work and is relevant for all pupils. What does it mean to use assessment information formatively? It is not as clear-cut as being able to record information from responses to a ready-made test. A different way of discussing formative assessment has evolved in the literature that does not mention specific scores from tests. Rather, the literature on formative assessment discusses how information may be used in ways that impact on pupils' achievements, and the conditions necessary in practice to facilitate this. For more explicit descriptions and discussions on this, see Black & Wiliam (1998), Stobart & Gipps (1997), Torrance & Pryor (1998), and Black *et al.* (2003). Key messages from this body of work about strategies that are supportive include the following: 'wait time' – giving students time to reflect on questions before having to make a response; comment-only marking – this involves giving specific feedback on their work, but not giving grades or marks. Another key finding relates to the value of peer and self assessment, as these involve the learner in discussing their own or someone else's work in relation to success criteria.

However, a critical aspect of assessment information being used formatively is the way in which teacher feedback intent is translated into pupil feedback effect. What makes the critical difference to pupils actually acting on the feedback given to them by teachers? Sadler (1989, 1998) has noted that key elements of this are: (i) the need for teachers to make the success criteria transparent and explicit for pupils; and (ii) the need for pupils to then accept and act on their role as learners that, in turn, means assessment practices should facilitate both these processes. In the first instance it should not be a 'guessing game' for pupils. Assessment practices that can enhance pupil achievement and learning should provide opportunities for pupils to come to know the criteria for being successful. Secondly, these practices should provide opportunities for pupils to rehearse these success criteria. What is being argued for are ways of assessing children's literacy that allow the child's voice to be heard.

Classroom Literacy Assessment Practices

What opportunities do reading and writing assessment practices afford pupils that enable them to share in constructing the success criteria in the first instance, and secondly afford them the opportunity to then, demonstrate how their reading and writing gives evidence of these criteria? Table 1 provides an overview of four common literacy assessment practices and a summary of the opportunities provided for pupil

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engagement in them. The assessment practices highlighted here are not presented as the assessment practices engaged in by all classroom teachers, but rather, as assessment practices that could typically be carried out by classroom teachers as ways of finding out about children's reading and writing.

TABLE 1

Assessment Practice: <i>Standardised Test</i>	
<i>What information does it yield?</i>	It provides information about this child's achievements relative to the rest of the population.
<i>Who records this information?</i>	Information is documented, recorded and reported by the teacher.
<i>How does this information feed forward into teaching and learning?</i>	Overall pointers for the teacher if a significant number of pupils show weakness in a particular area. Provides information about a particular child's literacy achievement that could inform future literacy instruction, although mainly if the child is underachieving.
<i>To what extent is the voice of the child enabled to be heard?</i>	Pupils are unlikely to take risks to reveal what might, in effect, be errors as these are used to make comparative judgements.
Assessment Practice: <i>Running Records</i>	
<i>What information does it yield?</i>	The cueing strategies used by pupils as they read.
<i>Who records this information?</i>	The teacher records and documents very detailed information.
<i>How does this information feed forward into teaching and learning?</i>	An analysis of pupil errors helps inform the kind of reading strategies that pupils need to improve.
<i>To what extent is the voice of the child enabled to be heard?</i>	The child and teacher work in a one-to-one situation and thus the child may feel more comfortable revealing his/her learning to the teacher. It helps make the invisible process of reading more visible.
Assessment Practice: <i>Portfolio</i>	
<i>What information does it yield?</i>	This documents a child's learning journey as s/he writes; the content and engagement in different stages of the writing.
<i>Who records this information?</i>	Child records and documents, with some consultation with the teacher and perhaps peers.
<i>How does this information feed forward into teaching and learning?</i>	Visible, tangible evidence of what a child can do is available to both teacher and pupil. This information can be used by both to inform future developments in writing.
<i>To what extent is the voice of the child enabled to be heard?</i>	The child has ownership of the portfolio arising from the fact that it is s/he who decides what goes into the folder and also the reason for those choices.

TABLE 1 - CONTD.

Assessment Practice: Reading/Writing Conference	
<i>What information does it yield?</i>	This gives information about pupils' literacy development and potential development. Provides information about the pupil as a reader and writer.
<i>Who records this information?</i>	Child decides and chooses what to record; may get some 'technical' help from the teacher.
<i>How does this information feed forward into teaching and learning?</i>	Visible, tangible evidence of what a child can do is available to both teacher and pupil. This information can be used by both to inform future developments in writing.
<i>To what extent is the voice of the child enabled to be heard?</i>	Child understands that s/he has a contribution to make to own literacy development. Decisions about own learning are important.

Standardised Tests

Standardised reading tests have been a traditional feature of reading assessment and are an increasing feature of life in Irish classrooms (e.g. Curran, 1994; Hall and Kavanagh, 2002). Norm referenced tests such as the Micra-T and the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (DPRT) indicate how the reader rates in relation to other same-age readers or same-grade readers in the population. While pupils may understand what they need to do in order to score well on such tests, they do not share in the construction of the success criteria. In addition, the information yielded through scores on these tests is not detailed enough to be useful for improving teaching (Brookhart, 1999). They tend to focus teachers on what children cannot do rather than on what they can do. Nevertheless it must be noted that as one source of evidence among others, test results can be useful indicators of achievement. The problem with using assessment information to enhance children's literacy achievements occurs when tests such as these are the primary way of recording and documenting children's achievements. They serve the summative purpose of assessment very well but not the formative purpose.

Running Records

Running Records (Clay, 1985) are a means of analysing how children use different cueing systems (grapho-phonetic, syntactic and semantic) as they read a text aloud. They assess reading directly. They involve the

observation, recording and evaluation of the 'errors' a child makes while reading aloud. The teacher makes annotations of the differences between the text as read and the text as written. The underlying assumption is that the miscues made by the reader offer insights into the range and efficiency with which s/he applies those strategies. The outcome of the assessment is a descriptive and evaluative account of the reader's strategies while reading. Because the interpretation is tied to data it provides a rich source of information that is helpful to the teacher deciding how best to plan for that child's literacy learning. In terms of enabling the child's voice to be heard, it makes the invisible process of reading more visible, and therefore more easily documented.

Portfolios

Portfolios are a means of documenting a child's writing journey. Portfolios can be used summatively; for example, a showcase portfolio which displays a pupil's best pieces of work could be used to identify his/her writing achievement at a point in time, and statements could be made about the level of this work. However, the portfolios that contribute most to helping the child improve his/her writing are the documentation portfolio and the process portfolio (Valencia, 1998). Both capture the steps taken as the child completes a piece of writing. They can provide very tangible evidence for both teacher and pupil about what it is the child can do and also note areas for future development. They can be the focus of a writing conference (see below) and since the child has the final call on what to include in the portfolio, a very powerful message is given about whose voice counts here.

Reading and Writing Conferences

Reading and writing conferences are used to discuss the child's achievements and interests as a language user. They can be a more structured form of the on-going dialogue between teacher and pupils about themselves as readers and writers. The teacher and child together may discuss specific pieces of work and plan ahead i.e. set targets and goals around that child's literacy progress (Barrs *et al.*, 1992). Decisions reached at the conference are recorded and can be revisited at a later stage to review progress in relation to the goals and targets set. As an assessment tool, these conferences can give information about the pupil as a reader and writer, as well as what reading and writing skills s/he may have and use. Since children themselves are involved in setting targets they get powerful

messages about the contributions they can make to their literacy development. In other words the child can say ‘the decisions I make about my learning are important’.

Whether or What

Having described some assessment practices that are commonly used to document pupils’ achievements and progress in reading and writing, we now discuss the extent to which these assessments can yield information that can be used formatively i.e. to provide information that can directly inform future teaching and learning for these pupils. A key aspect of being able to use assessment information formatively is being able to find out not so much *whether* a pupil knows or can do certain tasks, as to find out *what* this pupil knows or can do (Hall, 2000). This information can then be used by the teacher as the basis for feedback to the pupil about his/her literacy skills and knowledge and practices. The nature of the interactions within this feedback process should also allow for dialogue between teacher and pupil.

In this regard, of the practices outlined in Table 1, it would seem that portfolios and reading/writing conferences provide the best opportunities for obtaining the kind of information that will facilitate dialogical interactions. In particular, they can provide explicit and tangible evidence to the learner that their involvement is important, that their contributions count. This is consistent with a socio-cultural perspective on literacy which considers the acquisition of school literacy practice as bound up with learners’ motivations to identify with that practice (Hall, 2003). They must accept and believe that it is useful to their lives. Knowing literacy and becoming a reader and writer means being able to participate in a community of literate practitioners, and being able to use the tools and technology of the community. Therefore we need ways of facilitating pupils’ participation in literacy activities including assessment. It is acknowledged that it is not possible to predict in any absolute way how learners might position themselves in these assessments, as all participants have agency, and the context itself – the particular setting and the relationships within that setting – mediate responses and interpretation and, therefore, outcomes.

Another factor to be considered in relation to assessing *what* a child knows or can do is what might be termed the multi-faceted nature of what it means to be literate. Literacy is not a simple matter; it is complex and multi-dimensional (Hall, 2003). There are many ways of demonstrating

how one can read and write. It is therefore important to find a variety of ways of documenting this, in order to provide the best possible opportunities for children to engage in, and with, the process.

Conclusion

One of the most important issues to be considered in relation to any type of assessment is the suitability of the assessment procedure for the area being assessed, and for the assessment purpose. In other words, is the assessment approach really assessing what we believe reading and writing to be and will the resulting information be useful to inform the next steps of learning? All assessment procedures, and especially reading tests will have flaws and limitations. Hence there is a need to assess literacy learners in a variety of literacy situations and through a variety of modes, written and oral. For example, reading comprehension need not be assessed only via the written mode. Learners who have not yet mastered the print decoding process can still be assessed in relation to their ability to read narrative text. While much has been written about early intervention and early literacy assessment, particularly in relation to phonemic awareness – all focussing on print and decoding – attention to comprehension has perhaps received less emphasis. Recently researchers (Paris & Paris, 2003) using wordless picture books have created and tested assessment materials and procedures that can be used to assess young children's narrative comprehension, whether or not they can decode print. The research shows that this approach can complement existing assessments and link comprehension to teaching and learning. The arguments presented here are not intended to suggest that one assessment practice is better than another. Rather, we are arguing that multiple ways of describing children's literacy development must be in place to reflect the multi-dimensional character of literacy itself and to reflect the contestable nature of evidence. In particular, assessment practices need to be in place that demonstrate to children that their ways of showing how they read and write are important, and that their contributions to identifying next steps in their learning count.

This may be particularly relevant and timely in the current context of Irish primary education. The English curriculum published in 1999, both in terms of its content and recommended methodologies, highlights the role of pupils in their learning (NCCA, 1999a, 1999b). This curriculum also recognises a role for assessment that is an integral part of teaching and learning. It is five years since the initial implementation of this curriculum, and to date little consideration has been given to the nature of the

assessment practices best suited to the teaching and learning envisaged in this curriculum. In fact, debates and discussions about assessment have centred around whether schools should publish their summative assessment results and the need to provide teachers with suitable diagnostic tests. Formative assessment practices, the practices that are most closely linked with enhanced pupil achievement, have not yet been placed on the assessment agenda.

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