

What Counts? Literacy Assessment in Urban Schools

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In urban elementary schools, considerable energy is focused on raising children's achievement in literacy. Literacy is central to learning in all subject areas throughout school, and in every aspect of literacy achievement—whether it's comprehension, vocabulary, word recognition, or writing—children in U.S. urban schools have significantly more difficulty than the overall population (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). From the 1990s on, a great deal of excellent work has focused on changing this situation. Along with district- and school-based initiatives, research studies have shed light on ways in which factors like professional development, whole-school reform, and teacher education can improve the literacy skills, dispositions, and habits of children in urban environments.

In this column, I discuss another factor that can add significantly to the success of literacy instruction in urban settings: assessment. It may seem strange to focus on this factor since the policy of the past decade of promoting testing as if it were the means to higher reading achievement has shown no evidence whatsoever that this was a good idea. Why, then, examine assessment as a feature that can help urban children learn to read and write? It is precisely because literacy assessment has gone wrong in so many of our urban schools that such an examination is needed.

Literacy Assessment in Urban Schools Today: A Common Scenario

As a result of the approach to assessment that has emerged in elementary and secondary schools over

the past decade and been reinforced by federal grant initiatives, such as Reading First, many urban schools have robust assessment programs. At all grade levels, a thoughtful school literacy assessment program includes four aspects:

1. Screening—Typically occurring at the beginning of the school year, its purpose is to identify children who score very poorly in language and literacy and therefore are in need of considerable extra support to accelerate their progress so that they can work at grade level. Screening is usually completed by either the classroom teacher or a reading specialist. Instruments, such as the Texas Primary Reading Inventory or DIBELS, are commonly used for this phase of assessment.
2. Diagnosing—This phase serves as a follow-up for children identified as at risk during the screening process. Diagnosing usually involves a battery of different assessments administered by a reading specialist or special education personnel and aimed at obtaining in-depth information about a child's literacy and language strengths and needs.
3. Progress monitoring—An individual, ongoing assessment of how a child is responding to instruction, progress monitoring is conducted at least monthly, but more typically weekly or biweekly, by the child's teacher. This phase of assessment is accomplished through short, curriculum-based measurements (CBMs), which may be a component of a core reading program; through more general CBMs, such as those developed by Fuchs and colleagues (see

Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008); or through a formal instrument, like DIBELS.

4. Outcomes—This end-of-year assessment measures how each child and relevant groups of children (e.g., class, grade level, school) performed in literacy and language. A school or district typically uses its state test or a published standardized reading test, such as the SAT10 or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, to assess outcomes.

The goal of a school assessment program should be to improve instruction for children. With anything less, we run the danger of assessment becoming an end unto itself rather than a means to an end. The four types of data just outlined can help us realize a most felicitous everyday situation in the classroom regarding assessment: the assessment-instruction cycle, which sees assessment as “an integral part of what we teach (curriculum) and how we teach it (pedagogy) rather than as a process that is conducted in addition to—and apart from—instruction” (Glasswell & Teale, 2007, p. 262). When assessment and instruction work together seamlessly and each informs the other, instructional time is maximized and assessment time minimized.

What Went Wrong?

The framework for literacy assessment just outlined is eminently sensible, both theoretically and practically, and it is compatible with the concept of the assessment-instruction cycle. Unfortunately, the promise of this framework has not translated into reality in many urban elementary schools for two interrelated reasons. The first has to do with the content of the literacy assessments that have become ascendant in urban elementary schools.

Reputedly, Albert Einstein, the eminent physicist, had a sign on his door that read something like this: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” Since physicists love numbers, this idea coming from Einstein should give us special pause. There is a power in numbers, but also a danger. In recent years, we in education seem to have become increasingly enamored of numbers, perhaps because the idea of something with a scientific basis seems to indicate

an inherent association with numbers. On the curriculum front, Accelerated Reader and similar programs have offered numbers that promise to pinpoint a student’s ideal reading level, “personalize reading practice” to that level, and represent each student’s quiz results as well as his or her “overall progress for both Reading Practice and Vocabulary” (see www.renlearn.com/ar/overview.aspx). On the assessment front, measures like DIBELS (dibels.uoregon.edu) provide numbers on students’ fluency in a variety of dimensions of literacy, from kindergarten through grade 6, enabling regular monitoring and analyses of those scores across years of children’s development.

However, as Einstein cautions, just because something can be counted doesn’t mean it counts. If the numbers from an assessment are to be useful, they must measure something worth measuring. In other words, the content of an assessment should cover all the bases of what is developmentally important at a particular time and avoid spending precious classroom time assessing the unimportant things.

The second reason that many urban schools’ assessment programs have gone off track is the direction of the relationship that has developed between literacy assessments and literacy curriculum and instruction. As stated earlier, we want assessment to be an integral part of curriculum and instruction, but it is also important to understand that the relationship between assessment and curriculum and instruction is not really like the chicken-and-egg conundrum. I believe that the answer here is that curriculum rules—or more accurately, standards rule. That is to say, the first task should be to identify what children need to know and to do in literacy at each grade level; from those standards should spring the means for getting there (curriculum and instruction) and for charting progress toward their achievements (assessment). In many cases, however, the direction has been reversed, and assessments rather than standards drive what elementary school literacy programs teach.

This situation often happens when a school or district chooses an assessment program for its scientific credibility. This is a good idea because (a) the assessments evidence high reliability and respectable validity correlations, so the evaluation people in the district are happy; (b) they measure things that teachers teach in their classrooms, such as phonics skills, fluency, and sight word skills, so the teachers are on board; and (c) they can report data in an understandable way and on a regular basis to a variety

of audiences from teachers to parents to the school board, so the administration buys in. However, because of the scientific cache (Pearson, 2006) of the assessments, it isn't long before what gets taught is the material measured by the assessments. That's not a wholly bad situation, of course, because the assessments measure some very important things. What is bad, though, is that what the assessments measure ends up being virtually all that is taught. In other words, the curriculum becomes dictated and limited by the assessments.

It happens almost by stealth; we, as teachers, schools, or districts, fall into a pattern of looking at the scores to see how we're doing. If it's low here, make an adjustment; if it's high there, pat ourselves on the back. As Pearson (2006) put it, "an indicator of progress is elevated to the status of a curricular goal" (p. xiv). The problem is, we wake up around middle school to discover that our students can't develop interpretations, read critically, write a decent extended response to a piece of literature, and so on. We have succeeded in teaching many of them most of the foundational reading skills, but hardly any of our students read at the advanced or proficient level. In addition, most cannot read content area texts, textbooks, or information on the Internet at their grade level because those facets of literacy that are easy to count (e.g., alphabet knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, reading accuracy, reading rate, spelling accuracy), which have become the curricular goals, are not the only important aspects of being a good reader and writer. Other things that matter (e.g., disciplinary knowledge, oral language, print and online comprehension) are harder to count and therefore frequently not present in the assessments.

The use of DIBELS serves as an example. Everyone seems to be picking on DIBELS these days (e.g., Goodman, 2006; Pearson, 2006; Samuels, 2007; Tierney & Thome, 2006), and that's probably because DIBELS pulled the wool over people's eyes, although perhaps unintentionally. It purported to provide measures of early literacy development, the results of which "[could] be used to evaluate individual student development as well as provide grade-level feedback toward validated instructional objectives" (see dibels.uoregon.edu/dibelsinfo.php). However, for a host of reasons, in multiple urban schools and in virtually all urban schools that received Reading First grants, the literacy curriculum has developed mainly into a reading curriculum because writing is not one of the "big

five" components of reading instruction. The reading curriculum emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency to the virtual exclusion of comprehension and vocabulary because of what is and isn't measured on DIBELS. Thus, what could and probably should have been a useful tool in urban schools' attempts to raise reading achievement has instead ended up having a pernicious, narrowing effect on teacher practice (Tierney & Thome, 2006) and the scope of the literacy curriculum (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007).

What Would Help?

As previously stated, literacy assessment has become a hindrance to higher literacy achievement in many urban schools rather than functioning as a factor that promotes it. There is no easy way out of this problem, but the following are strategies that urban schools and districts have used with success:

- Realize what counts. Get involvement across all grades and draw upon the scientific information as well as your state standards to determine what is important for your students to learn and for you to teach at each grade level. Set the developmental trajectory of your students' literacy learning. There are a number of ways that schools and districts have approached this curriculum alignment task; one that has proven especially fruitful recently is the Standards Based Change Process, which involves developing grade-level benchmarks, student-focused "I Can" statements, and associated assessments (Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008a; Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008b).
- Count everything that counts. Put assessment measures in place that cover all the significant facets of literacy learning that you have identified. Do everything possible to ensure that the assessment procedures you adopt provide the data needed for teachers to make instructional decisions about individual children and also minimize the time taken away from instruction. I don't literally mean that every assessment used should be a quantitative measure that yields a numeric score, but be sure that each significant dimension of a child's developing literacy knowledge and skill is part of the assessment

plan. There is no faster way to guarantee that something will be excluded from the curriculum than for teachers to perceive that it doesn't really count.

- Provide teachers and administrators with thoughtful and engaging professional development about the assessment plan and specific assessment instruments and procedures. A literacy assessment process that contributes to enhanced literacy achievement doesn't run itself once a school has decided what to assess and how. Good professional development (a) helps teachers understand the relationship between assessment and teaching, (b) ensures that school and district personnel effectively employ screening, diagnosing, progress monitoring, and outcome assessments, and (c) enables teachers to administer, interpret, and use results from the assessments to differentiate and improve instruction.

We clearly do not know everything about the literacy education of urban youth, but we do know enough to succeed in teaching them to read and write at significantly higher levels, with more diverse texts, and in more diverse contexts than they currently do. Assessment can play a key role in enhancing literacy achievement in urban schools. However, we have to keep our eyes on everything that counts to help urban children become proficient, willing readers and writers.

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