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ABSTRACT

This document, part of a series of papers which describe the assessment of student learning in areas of the curriculum from prekindergarten through grade 12, focuses on assessment in the language arts. Current practices are reviewed. Subsequent sections describe guidelines for appropriate curriculum goals and content in language arts programs. A discussion of traditional and alternative assessment practices in language arts follows. Particular attention is given to portfolio assessment. Many of the strategies described are in the early stages of development and implementation. Some of the better-known assessment strategies such as portfolio assessment and performance assessment still lack clearly stated objectives and uniform standards or criteria for scoring. The approaches sketched in this report do have great potential for providing fair and accurate assessment, with significant impact on the instruction and learning of children. (SLD)

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**ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN
LANGUAGE ARTS**

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in the Assessment of Student Learning**

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**South Carolina Center for Excellence in the
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ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN LANGUAGE ARTS

Foreword

This report is part of a series of documents prepared by the South Carolina Center for Excellence in the Assessment of Student Learning (CEASL) to describe assessment of student learning in various school curriculum areas from prekindergarten through grade twelve. The focus of this document is assessment in language arts. The report begins with an overview of current practices. Subsequent sections describe the guidelines for appropriate curriculum goals and content in language arts programs and a discussion of traditional and alternative assessment practices in language arts follows.

The South Carolina Center for Excellence in the Assessment of Student Learning was established by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and is supported by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and the College of Education, University of South Carolina. The purpose of this Center is to increase awareness among teacher-educators of recent efforts to change approaches used to assess students' learning in pre-school through high school, and to encourage and support efforts to enhance training in testing, measurement and the assessment of students' learning for preservice educators. The Center is based on the educational philosophy that the fair, accurate and informative assessment of students' learning is an integral part of the teaching-learning process.

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Comments or suggestions concerning the information in this report are welcome and may be directed to the authors at the Center.

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Introduction

A new perspective on language arts curriculum and instruction is beginning to emerge which is qualitatively different from previous views. This new perspective is moving language arts in a direction that leads to creating learner centered classrooms which elicit a broader range of student performances. At the same time, new assessment strategies have been developed to evaluate student performances which demonstrate students' growth as language learners and users. While knowledge and ability in language mechanics still need to be evaluated, it is now considered equally important to assess more complex literacy development (Tierney, 1991). This report describes current trends in language arts assessment in relation to new directions in language arts curriculum and instruction.

How Literacy Develops

In 1988-89, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a working paper entitled "NCTE's Position On The Teaching Of English: Assumptions And Practices" (NCTE, 1989). This paper described a context of language learning and assessment very different from the traditional view of teaching reading and writing through basal reading series and language workbooks with their prescribed content and skills scope and sequence. After many years of research in reading (Paris & Van Kraayenoord, 1992), and writing, (Calkins, 1986; Harste & Short, 1988), new theories have emerged which refute the belief that language should be taught through drill and practice of discrete skills. Also discarded is the idea that children can not and should not be allowed to read real prose or write original texts until they have mastered the universals of mechanics and form which govern meaning in language.

The new perspective supported by educational researchers and language arts teachers is that children and teachers should engage in social transactions using language which offer opportunities for children to construct knowledge of phonics and spelling, genre' and style, audience and purpose (Mills, 1990; Weaver, 1990). These transactions occur while children and teachers are engaged in authentic reading and writing tasks. Authentic reading tasks are whole stories read for pleasure or vicarious experiences, and non-fiction resources read to provide information for projects and research. Authentic writing tasks are personal journals and stories, letters, research reports and literature responses. These tasks are considered authentic because they are performed for real purposes and are not artificially contrived for classroom use. Authentic tasks provide opportunities for instruction and assessment in basic skills and also in more complex forms of literacy within the context of real literacy events (Anthony, 1991; Eggleton, 1990; Goodman, 1992; Harp, 1991; Tierney, 1991).

Curriculum Goals for Literacy Development

Language arts teachers are creating curriculum with specific goals to achieve language proficiency in order to ensure that language learners can develop skill and proficiency in authentic literacy tasks. One of the goals of a language arts curriculum, from a modern perspective, is to provide opportunities to encounter and use language with increasing fluency

(Anthony, 1991; Centre for Language in Primary Education, 1988). Another goal is to enable learners to experience and understand the wide range of genres and functions available to them through language, how these extend the learner's personal and social identities, and how they provide some control over their world (NCTE, 1989). A third goal of a language arts curriculum is to aid children in developing ownership of their own literacy and their ability to use that literacy to learn in any context (Anthony, 1991; Goodman, 1992).

In order to meet these curricular goals, language arts teachers align their instructional objectives with the developmental needs of language learners and engage in on-going assessment procedures which can inform the instructional needs for each learner (Anthony, 1991; Centre for Language in Primary Education, 1988). Reading instruction is being accomplished through the use of whole texts and shared literature experiences. Instruction in writing focuses on the writing process which allows writing skills to emerge through composition of products for social purposes (Harp 1991; Weaver, 1990). Skills in listening and speaking are practiced through group discussions of literature and plays which re-enact stories, oral presentations of science projects, and engagements in social studies. Children are guided in making connections between the skills they learn such as spelling, phonics, and syntax in writing, or context clues, and story grammars in reading, and the meaning making process which employs these skills (Goodman, 1992; Harp, 1991). Teachers need ways of knowing how children's language development is progressing in order to make curricular and instructional decisions and this leads to issues in testing and assessment.

Traditional Testing in Language Arts

Traditional approaches to learning assessment in language arts often fail to provide information about the learner's developmental progress that is meaningful and useful to the teacher. When teachers rely on prepackaged programs of reading and writing at the classroom level, children often learn isolated skills in phonics for decoding words or how to select the main idea or characters encountered in a short reading passage or story. Skills are typically practiced with worksheet drills in decontextualized sentences which are not related to each other and do not form a whole story or nonfiction text (Paris & Van Kraayenoord, 1992). Exercises which drill grammar rules such as creating plurals or past tense traditionally occupy much of children's time without allowing the children practice in actually composing their own text. Unfortunately, a child may be able to change fifty words to the past tense without being able to accurately use the past tense in an original sentence (Harp, 1991; Tierney, 1991).

Language arts experts point out that prepackaged programs use tests that do not use a child's original text production to assess that child's ability to construct a meaningful sentence. Such tests often target isolated pieces of knowledge which the child is expected to have learned through the practice drills as measures of whether the child can write. These tests are not connected to any other reading or writing the child has been doing or might want to do for other purposes but are related only to what the child has practiced or been drilled on in class. Traditional tests inform the teacher of what the child can do in response to classroom tasks similar to those practiced in drills, such as filling in blanks or choosing

multiple choice answers. This does not provide information about what the children can do on their own without these artificial prompts. Information from traditional tests do not help the teacher or the child know why the child may not understand a reading passage or be unable to compose a sentence that communicates an intended message (Goodman, 1992; Harp, 1991).

Characteristics of Desirable Assessment

The emergence of redefined curriculum goals and new instructional strategies requires new assessment approaches if language arts curriculum, instruction, and assessment are to be properly aligned. For example, assessment in language arts should measure a learner's ability to use language for real comprehension and communication purposes as these become the new goals of language arts instruction.

Most teachers recognize that students develop at different rates and no two students are exactly alike in their knowledge about language and their ability to use language (Calkins, 1986; Harp, 1991; Harste, 1988). Anthony (1991) stresses the need for teachers to assess a child's language development over time because of the different rate at which children's literacy develops. Therefore, teachers need tools and strategies which are sensitive to students' individual differences and inform the teacher of students' progress toward curricular goals (Linek, 1991).

New assessment techniques which can provide an accurate individual profile of students' literacy progress have been developed and are being field tested and used in classrooms across the United States and in many provinces in Canada (Anthony, 1991; Linek, 1991; Centre for Primary Education, 1988). These new assessment strategies are intended to help teachers better evaluate their students' individual progress in language development. These assessment strategies are designed to match new trends in curriculum development and instructional perspectives and to provide teachers more sensitive tools to assess and evaluate children's literacy development.

Experts in the field offer the following guidelines for appropriate language arts assessment procedures.

Guidelines for Language Arts Assessment Procedures Should Be...

- individualistic and based on the child's own unique characteristics
- authentic in the task performed
- continuous and on going to reflect growth over time
- based on clearly identified and established criteria for reliability
- based on multiple modes of performance
- based on multiple assessment methods
- based on processes, not just products
- valid and aligned with the instructional and curricular goals
- descriptive as well as diagnostic providing worthwhile information
- an integrated evaluation of the whole child as a language learner/user
- summative showing whether instructional strategies have been successful
- easily employed during or after instruction, not obtrusive or burdensome

Source: Harp, 1991; Tierney, 1991; Weaver, 1990.

Alternative Assessment Strategies for Reading and Writing

The following sections report assessment strategies which are alternatives to standardized tests and traditional classroom tests for providing evaluations of students as language learners. Each strategy is described in terms of performances or products which can be collected or other data that can be gathered as evidence of language development. Certain features of students' work that describe appropriate performance and production are described. A method of record keeping and reporting is suggested for each assessment strategy to be used independently or in conjunction with an overall recording/reporting system.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolios provide a framework and mechanism for the systematic collection of each student's work. A portfolio can be a collection of diverse pieces of student work, or it can be devoted to a collection of specific products such as writing samples or literature logs (Harp, 1991; Tierney, 1991). A portfolio has a definite purpose and goal which help determine what materials are included in the collection. Both the student and the teacher work together on developing a student's portfolio, but students make decisions through self evaluation of their work as to which pieces of the collection best represent them as a language user. Teachers use pieces selected by the student to evaluate the student's progress.

Collectable Artifacts

Writing portfolios may include specified or unrestricted writing samples. For example, students may collect rough and finished drafts of essays, letters, and research reports. They may also collect lists, spelling words, diaries, poems, charts, stories and books they have written. Students may also keep a personal or dialogue journal in their writing portfolio as samples of writing used for authentic purposes (Harp, 1991).

Reading portfolios can be used to gather and collect records of reading events or products of reading encounters. These records may include literature response journals and logs, lists of books read, variety of genres read, book reviews, miscue analysis reports, audiotapes of oral reading, story sketches and semantic maps, descriptions of strategic reading ability, metacognitive awareness inventories, literature interviews, attitude surveys and inventories, checklists, anecdotal records, teacher evaluations and student self evaluations (Tierney, 1991). Certain materials might be included in either a writing or reading portfolio. These might involve narrative summaries written by students or teachers in any subject area, student-teacher writing conference notes, and student self-evaluations (Weaver, 1990).

Descriptors

The following are some suggestions about useful features of students' work to consider when using collectable artifacts as evidence of student abilities in writing.

**Features of Student Work to Consider When Examining
a Students Writing Portfolio.**

Clearly defined purpose/or intention
Use of writing conventions including spelling and punctuation
Creativity
Variety
Imagination
Risk taking
Expression of ideas and feelings
Effective use of words or technique to achieve purpose
Self-edits
Attempts at different genres
Evidence of proper story grammar (plot, characterization, mood, setting)
Self evaluation

Depending on the developmental stage of the student, writing samples may begin as pictures depicting something the child wishes to express or communicate, may progress along the entire continuum of possible writing processes and products, and may culminate in finished essays and books. The following are some suggestions about useful features of students' work to consider when using collectable artifacts as evidence of student abilities in reading.

**Features of Students Work to Consider
When Examining a Students Reading Portfolio**

Clearly defined purpose/or intention
Ability to construct meaning from text
Self correction while reading
Enjoyment of reading activities
Variety of genres and authors
Sharing of reading experiences
Response to reading
Reads for personal reasons
Reflects upon reading strategies
Awareness of reading strengths and weaknesses
Reads with independence and intentionality
Ability to make inferences
Ability to make predictions
Acquires information
Attempts difficult vocabulary

Recording/Reporting

Each portfolio should have a table of contents which indicates what is included in the portfolio and why it is included. Methods of evaluating portfolio contents can include checklists of specific skills and abilities. For example, writing quality can be evaluated by looking at vocabulary choice and use, sentence completeness and complexity, and revision strategies. Writing mechanics can be evaluated by looking at correct grammar and

punctuation, organization and transitions. A variety of scoring procedures may be used to rate students' work.

Observational Checklists

Observational checklists involve the use of a chart or grid. Target skills, strategies or products are listed on the chart, generally going down the left side of the page. The contents listed across the top of the page depend on how the checklist will be used. A checklist for an individual student might list the class periods for a school day if the teacher wanted to observe the occurrences of the target skills or strategies for a single day. A weekly observation checklist would list the days of the week across the top of the chart.

Checklists can be as general or specific as needed, but in any case, the goal is to provide a quick and efficient method for noting when a student demonstrates an ability or achievement. The observations can be made during or following the learning process. Checklists can be developed for each individual child to record observations about specific abilities. For example, a checklist for language conventions in writing would have categories for spelling and grammar, a checklist for reading might have categories for context cues, phonics, charts or diagrams. Checklists can be used to record observations of broader categories for a more complete picture. A checklist in writing might include categories for choice of appropriate format, audience awareness, word choice, style and expression of ideas. A checklist in reading might include categories for retelling stories accurately, reading independently, and responding in journals or logs. Listening and speaking abilities can also be observed through detailed checklists which monitor following directions and discussions, understanding intentions in oral messages, pronouncing words clearly, using appropriate vocabulary to convey meaning, and discussing topics coherently.

Checklists can also be developed for the whole class with all the students names included. A class checklist gives each student's name and enables the teacher to quickly observe and record group processes and dynamics such as participation in peer editing and bookmaking and literature response circle or play re-enactments of stories read. Checklists provide accurate and detailed records for compiling longer anecdotal records and report forms to students and parents (Anthony, 1991).

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records may be used to provide detailed accounts of a wide range of student activities. This approach might be used to describe classroom activities, writing conferences, portfolio reviews, oral readings or story retelling. Anecdotal records might employ short, one or two sentence descriptions, or longer paragraphs. These lengthier descriptive records provide a rich sources of details for qualitatively describing an individual student's progress to the student, parents, and other teachers.

Anecdotal records are similar to observational checklists and can be use a similar format. Target skills, strategies, or products of interest can be listed on the left side of a form while students' names are listed across the top of the page. The entries in the grid would be

short descriptions or codes indicating what students were doing or had done relative to the target activities. In this way, anecdotal records provide teachers with a structured framework for observations. Notations are made with verbal descriptions not check marks and these can capture finer qualitative aspects of students' writing and reading. Detailed accounts of how the student proceeds from initial steps to later steps can be noted and used to assess the student's progress. Anecdotal records can also be used to assess important affective components related to writing and reading. These include attitude toward the writing task or literature read, as well as self-esteem connected with stories written or novels read.

Summary

This report outlined some of the essential new directions in language arts curriculum, instruction and assessment. When curricular goals change and instructional approaches which meet those goals are applied, assessment strategies must be developed and aligned at the same time. The assessment strategies described in this report are alternatives to traditional testing methods of assessing students' language learning; however, in their present form, they should not be assumed to be a panacea for all learning assessment needs.

Many of these strategies are in the early stages of development and implementation, and there is some concern that they may be idiosyncratic to the teacher who developed them or the school which adopted them. Some alternative assessment strategies such as portfolio assessment and performance assessment still lack clearly stated objectives and uniform standards or criteria for scoring. It is difficult to determine the reliability and validity of these approaches and teachers are finding these assessment strategies difficult to develop and time consuming to use.

As children progress through our educational system, their growth and learning must be assessed in ways that are fair, accurate and appropriate. The assessment approaches described in this report have great potential for serving this function and for having a significant impact on improving instruction and learning for school children.

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