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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rationale for designing better literacy assessment for elementary school children. The "Literacy Profile" is a literacy assessment procedure designed to collect data about groups of elementary students and track literacy development more effectively than current standardized tests. It assumes that literacy assessment must: (1) be based on competence, (2) reflect what is known about literacy, and (3) foster new and different discussions about supporting learners by providing new ways to examine children's literate behaviors. To complete a Literacy Profile, children peruse collections of books, then select one to read (rather than reading contrived passages written for testing). Research on the Literacy Profile involved 55 elementary students and college students who were tutoring them. The college students administered the reading interview to each child. The activity provided insight into their understanding of reading. Next, the children selected books to read aloud onto audiotapes. The children also retold each story and wrote and drew about the books. The college students recorded and analyzed each reader's miscues. Miscue analysis and retelling scores were used to report the extent to which readers were effective and efficient. Results suggest the Literacy Profile is more authentic than standardized testing because children receive help selecting books that interest them (unlike in standardized testing which makes no allowances for developmental differences or personal preferences). (Contains 44 references). (SM)

# Literacy Assessment with the "Literacy Profile"

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This paper discusses the rationale for designing better literacy assessment for elementary children and describes the beginning steps toward developing and piloting an assessment procedure called "The Literacy Profile". This work-in-progress presents interesting problems to consider and proposes some new ways to think about and assess children's literacy development. The Literacy Profile is being designed as a tool for collecting data about large groups of children. If the procedure can be shown to be valid and reliable, it may well become a substitute for the standardized tests currently in use in schools.

## The Rationale for New Assessments of Literacy

The construct of literacy has changed dramatically over time. Currently, progressive educators view literacy as a process of interpreting the world and developing a conscious awareness that values, behaviors, and beliefs are socially constructed (Lytle &

Schultz, 1991). This view of literacy is far more complex than thinking of literacy as the basic acts of reading and writing. This complex view of literacy demands that we consider context, purpose, intertextual features, and multiple meanings to be important to the basic acts of reading and writing. At this point in time, we are just beginning to understand the constructive nature of reading and its close relationship to writing. We know to watch how readers use the multiple cueing systems available in the reading process and to watch for the reader's problem-solving strategies such as rereading, skipping words, or substituting meaningful alternatives. We watch how writers interpret tasks and organize themselves for writing, as well as their control of the mechanics of language. In short, we beginning to think more complexly about the processes of reading and writing.

There is a real gap, however, between our understanding of literacy and our ability to assess or profile the literacy development of children. Most of the assessment instruments currently used by schools to collect accountability data are poor measures. They have little construct validity in the face of the complex nature of literacy. For example, NAEP's (National Assessment of Educational Progress) reading and writing tests at the 4th and 8th grades collect a very limited kind of information, and yet NAEP publishes statistics showing that about one-third of the nation's children are "below basic" readers (Bruce, Osborn & Commeyras, 1991). How should this be interpreted? Are 33% of all children deficit readers?

It is common practice in the assessment field to look for deficiencies. Unfortunately, this practice has socialized teachers, parents, and even children, to view some learners as lacking the intellect needed to succeed as readers and writers. Newer

thinking about the development of literacy challenges this idea and asserts that almost all learners can learn to read and write, just as almost all learners have already learned to speak without any particular formal instruction. And it does matter how we frame our assessments of literate behaviors. On the one hand, research shows that children who perceive themselves as having low ability produce helpless behavior (Elliot & Dweck, 1988), are less interested in school tasks (MacIver, Stipek & Daniles, 1991), and resort to unproductive strategies such as half-heartedness or setting unobtainable goals (Covington & Berry, 1978). On the other hand, research documents that children develop more complex frameworks for thinking about their own literacy in classrooms operating from the perspective that **all** learners are competent (Rasinski & DeFord, 1988; Reif, 1982). Children asked "what kind of reader are you?" bring different criteria to bear depending on their classroom situation. Some bring a simple normative framework and respond "I'm a good reader" or "not so good," whereas others answer from a non-judgmental, descriptive framework by saying something like, "I read mostly fiction or books about horses" (Johnston, 1990).

Language educators are also beginning to critique "moment-in-time" sampling assessment procedures. One issue is that such writing samples are often decontextualized. Prompts written for a large group invariably miss some individual's experiential and interest needs. Another issue is that one-shot assessment tells nothing about the individual's developmental path. The writing for such assessments is scored on its conformity to a set of established standards or its status relative to age or grade level norms (Domico, 1993).

The relationship between reading and writing can inform an assessment of writing. There is evidence that good readers and writers often differ from poor ones in their understanding of text structure and text worlds. Better writers tend to be better readers; better writers read more than poorer writers; and better readers produce syntactically more complex writing than poorer readers (Moore, 1995; Belanger, 1987; Stotsky, 1984). Theorist working in the tradition of information processing (Flood & Lapp, 1987; Hayes & Flowers, 1980; Wittrock, 1983) similarly claim reading and writing draw on common cognitive processes to build a text world (Langer, 1986: Purcell-Gates, 1991). As Kucer (1985) explains it, "Reading and writing become one instance of text world production, drawing from a common pool of cognitive and linguistic operations" (p. 319).

The research supports an integrated reading-writing assessment, but there are no models for doing this. As Moore (1995) explains, "There is no information on individual growth curves or rates of learning to inform our planning because we have not yet designed text structure studies that would yield such findings" (p. 602). In other words, we need to develop new schemas for looking at children's writing in relation to what we know about them as readers. By comparing a student's writing to a standard, we can indicate whether the student has met the goals established by the learning community. This information does not, however, provide any insight into why the student performs as he or she does.

Researchers in the literacy field have experimented with a variety of alternative assessment procedures such as think alouds (Paris & Winograd, 1990) and interviews asking the students to talk about their perceptions of the reading and writing processes

(Kemp, 1987; Langer, 1986; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). For example the Burke Reading Interview asks students to talk about what they do when they come to something they do not know while they are reading. When students answer this, they give insight into their strategies for solving the most common problem encountered in reading (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987 ).

Miscue Analysis is another assessment procedure that gives more complex information. This is a procedure in which the reader reads a passage orally and the evaluator notes all of the errors on a copy of the text. These errors, or "miscues," can later be analyzed to determine how the reader orchestrates the reading process. The analysis determines what strategies and cueing systems the reader uses, thereby illuminating the parts of written language that make sense to the reader. When the teacher knows what the student can do, it is much easier to provide instruction that makes sense to the child and stretches the reader toward new understandings (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987).

Miscue Analysis can yield a score as well as qualitative data. Retellings can do this as well. Again, there are a number of studies to turn to (Barrs, Ellis, Hester & Thomas, 1989; Brown & Cambourne, 1986; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). The retelling amounts to simply asking the readers to recount the story or information in their own words. It is a direct measure of comprehension, uncomplicated by fabricated questions or writing requirements. The retelling can be transcribed to create a record of speech patterns as well.

**Creating the Literacy Profile**

As literacy constructs evolve, so must our assessment constructs. This is not happening fast enough in the Professional Development Schools where I work as a teacher educator. As a representative of the university, I am expected to foster conditions which promote "best practice" in these schools. Accountability assessments are one of the biggest stumbling blocks I face in this situation. Teachers see these assessments as their guidelines for teaching. They argue that they have no choice but to teach so that children will do well on these tests. This limits what our prospective teachers can see in the classrooms where they are learning to teach. As soon as it is possible, we need to introduce assessments more in keeping with our current understandings of literacy as an active meaning making process.

This has prompted me to begin developing a literacy assessment procedure called the Literacy Profile. My goal is to develop a literacy assessment tool to use with elementary school children that will track their literacy development better than the current district-mandated and state-mandated standardized tests.

The development is being guided by three important considerations. The profile assessment needs: 1) to be based on competence, 2) to reflect what the literacy community knows about literacy; and 3) to foster new and different conversations about how to support learners by providing a new way to look at children's literate behaviors. The ways we look determine what we can see, and we need to find ways to see more clearly with the children, to record their perceptions and problem-solving strategies. We can only

move schools toward a more thoughtful stance about literacy by demonstrating new possibilities.

This paper describes the progress of the first year of work on the Literacy Profiles. My research assistant, Denice Haines, and I worked on selecting passages, developing a set of interview questions, developing writing prompts, creating scoring rubrics, writing assessor directions, and checking for bias and language problems in the selected texts. The most daunting of these tasks has been passage selection. The profile system is being designed for use with children from grades one to six. We are using children's picture books as reading passages, and these books are assembled into text sets (6 different titles) at six levels: highly predictable, predictable, highly supportive, supportive, literary, and independent. The books were not leveled by a formula, but rather by an analysis of their predictability, their graphophonic regularity, their conceptual difficulty, and their dependence on specific background information. Good miscue analysis depends on providing an unfamiliar text, so the books had to be little known gems.

After using the texts with two different groups of children in two different schools, we know we have more work to do on passage selection. The lowest and highest levels have been most challenging to find. Some of the texts need to be moved up or down a level. Others just need to be eliminated. For example one of the picture books has such dominant pictures, we suspect the children did their retellings of the story based on the pictures and not the print.

Once we chose texts, we enlisted the help of undergraduate research assistants to prepare a typescript of each story and a retelling guide for each book to help the assessors

ask good questions following the reading. Denise and I also prepared a set of interview questions about the reading preferences and beliefs of the children.

The first attempts at using the Literacy Profile procedure with children were conducted by undergraduate students in my reading methods classes. These students were acting as tutors to third and fourth graders for a semester in a local elementary school. They conducted the literacy profile assessments with their tutoring partners and other children, assessing a total of fifty-five students.

When the undergraduates administered the profiles, they let the children peruse a collection of the books and choose one they wanted to read. We learned quickly that young readers choose books on the basis of the cover art, not the book's readability. The teacher interns had to listen to the children read a paragraph or two from the chosen book and determine if they were in the right level by counting the miscues (errors). If there was less than one miscue for every ten words, they moved the child up to the next level of book. This insured that the child would do enough problem-solving to allow for miscue analysis.

In this first round of data collection, the Literacy Profile procedure was conducted as follows. Each child worked one-on-one with a college student. The child was asked to orally answer the reading interview questions while the college student wrote his or her answers. Then the child was helped to choose a book to read. The child's oral reading was audio-taped. When the child finished reading, the college student asked the child to retell the story and prompted the child with questions from the retelling guide to get a complete retelling. Then the child was asked to write and draw about the book.

The college students analyzed the data collected from each child. Listening to the tape of the child's reading, each assessor recorded all the reader's miscues on a typescript of the book. Then the miscues were analyzed to provide information about the child's use of the syntactic, graphophonic, and semantic systems of language. These scores combined with the retelling scores were then used to report the extent to which each reader was effective (monitored meaning while reading and comprehended the whole of the story) and efficient (used the cueing systems in balance rather than over-relying on one system and used only the necessary amount of visual information).

In addition to asking each child to read and retell the story of the self-selected picture book, the assessors asked the children interview questions about reading and asked the children to write and draw in response to the story. The reading interviews provided insight into what each child understood about reading, and the retelling, drawing, and writing provided a window onto the meaning the readers assigned to the text. We did not however assign any scores to the drawing or writing in this pilot run.

**Insights about the First Generation of the Literacy Profile**

As a first check on the validity of the score generated by the Literacy Profile, we asked the teachers of the children to provide a variety of information about each child assessed. To check how well the leveled system of texts was working, we asked the teachers to tell us if they believed the child read on grade level or above or below. We also asked the teachers to compare the writing generated during the assessment to the

typical writing students did in the classroom. Finally, we asked the teachers to provide the language arts test scores for each student.

Using this comparative data, we were able to establish that the sequence of leveled books was providing a reasonable framework for the system. Children who were identified as reading below grade level chose books from levels lower than their more successful counterparts. The teachers' data also demonstrated that the writing we collected when we did the Literacy Profiles was very similar to what the children did in their classrooms. These were not pieces that reflected the writing process, wherein a student plans, drafts, revises, and edits with the support of a writing community, but merely response writings. Most of the children just retold the story once more.

One of the hypotheses we wanted to test was the possibility that the miscues analysis scores would correlate positively with the children's reading scores on the most recent standardized tests . We found that there was no correlation between test scores and miscue scores. While both have a relationship to reading, the framework for the two assessments are totally different. The miscue analysis results in numerical scores, but these measure entirely different constructs.

Several improvements need to be made before we do another round of assessment with the Literacy Profile system. We gained fascinating insight into children's beliefs about reading by conducting the reading interviews, so we would like to add questions about writing to the interview. We also need a scheme for assessing the writing that is not a rubric. Rubrics are useful in scoring crafted writing, but the writing we are collecting is more utiliatarian. We need to decide how best to look at it.

Finally, we are fascinated with the drawings the children produced. They are quite diverse and reflect very different points of attention. Some captured the sum of the story; others just a scene. We want to rewrite the prompt so that we encourage metaphorical thinking.

**What makes the Literacy Profile better than a standardized test of reading?**

The Literacy Profile under development is better in several ways. First, it is designed to be more authentic than a test. To complete a Literacy Profile, we ask the children to read real books rather than contrived passages written just for the purposes of testing. Secondly, the information provided by the Literacy Profile is qualitatively different than the information provided by tests. The tests divide reading and language use into subskills such as "recognizes cause and effect" or "draws inferences" and assesses each of theses subskills. The profile assessment looks at how the reader applies the skills of reading and assesses the reader's success in using the subsystems of language as she reads. In addition, the profile includes an interview which provides information about the reader's beliefs about the reading process and the reader's sense of efficacy. Given newer understandings of literacy development, the information provided by the profile is more useful.

Another real difference between standardized tests and the profile is that the children are helped to choose a book that both interests and challenges them. Standardized tests make no allowances for developmental differences or personal preferences or interests. This is a serious weakness because it is impossible to gain valid

information about a child's reading strategies if the child cannot read or is not motivated to read the passages offered. To know what kind of problem-solving skills the child brings to the reading process, we must provide the child with a text that falls into his or her reading range and interest.

Initially, the university can train the preservice teachers in the Professional Development Schools to provide this assessment service for the school. Preparing preservice teachers to administer the Literacy Profile adds to their knowledge about the reading process. Conducting the assessment provides first hand experience in analyzing reading from a more informed perspective. In addition, teachers in the schools can also be educated by this reading and writing assessment, which can, in turn, change how they support readers in their classrooms.

As Meyers (1996) points out, we are "changing our minds" about literacy--what it is an how we use it. We desperately need assessment tools that reflect some of the changes we understand in theory, but struggle to introduce into the classroom of public schools.

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