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Authentic Assessment in the Classroom: Principles and Practices

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The Need for Authentic Assessment

In her storybook *First Grade Takes a Test,* Miriam Cohen (1980) makes poignantly clear the concerns regarding traditional methods of assessment. The story is told from the perspective of a 1st grade teacher and her students, and their words mesh beautifully with Lillian Hoban's illustrations to show us how students begin to question their self-worth and competence when they find out that only one student in the class "did a good test." Fortunately, the students' teacher, like most good teachers, understands the strengths of her students and their need to feel good about themselves as learners, and she responds appropriately: "The test doesn't tell us everything. It doesn't tell us all the things you can do! You can build things! You can read books! You can make pictures! You have good ideas! . . . Those are important things."

This classroom scenario is not unique. Many teachers across the country are acutely aware that tests don't tell us everything. In fact, they know that no single method of assessment can provide all the information we need. They also recognize that traditional methods of assessment (i.e., standardized tests, criterion-referenced tests, teacher-made tests, and commercially developed tests) often ignore the instructional contexts in which the learning occurred and are therefore outdated and inappropriate models of assessment (Neill and Medina 1989; Shepard 1989; Winograd, Paris, and Bridge 1991). Yet many feel that traditional testing will remain a way of life in classrooms because of the use (or misuse) of tests in judging the effectiveness of schools and teachers, in placing students in special programs, in retaining or passing students, in making policy and curricular decisions, and in determining whether programs receive funding (Routman 1991; Tierney, Carter, and Desai 1991).

The recent period of educational reform, however, has proven rich in possibilities for those interested in using assessment in more constructive ways to support children's learning. In this chapter, we identify some of the principles underlying the move

to more constructive assessments, and we examine specific techniques and strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms. Our experiences are concerned primarily with young children learning to be literate, so most of our examples are drawn from reading and writing instruction. Authentic assessment, however, is relevant throughout the grades and across the curriculum.

What Is Authentic Assessment?

Authentic assessment is assessment that occurs continually in the context of a meaningful learning environment and reflects actual and worthwhile learning experiences that can be documented through observation, anecdotal records, journals, logs, work samples, conferences, portfolios, writing, discussions, experiments, presentations, exhibits, projects, and other methods. Authentic assessments may include individual as well as group tasks. The emphasis is on self-reflection, understanding, and growth rather than on responses based only on the recall of isolated facts.

The intent of authentic assessment is to involve learners in tasks that require them to apply knowledge in real-world experiences. Authentic assessment discourages paper-and-pencil tests that are disconnected from the teaching and learning actually taking place. In authentic assessment, there is a personal intent, a reason to engage, and a genuine audience beyond the teacher (Crafton 1991).

Imagine a 5th grade classroom in which students collaborate to create a school newspaper for the purpose of sharing school and community news. The paper will include editorials, recipes, feature stories, and consumer reports. Imagine also that students help develop criteria for assessing their individual and class projects. This project provides students with opportunities to demonstrate their ability to organize ideas, write, research, advertise, and communicate effectively with the public. It allows them to receive instruction in the various types of writing necessary to complete the project, and to make adjustments and revise content as they reflect on the learning process with their teacher and classmates until they "go to press." These real-life experiences remind us "that school is not for getting ready to do the real stuff of life sometime in the distant future, it is for doing real things, for real audiences, and for ourselves, right now" (Crafton, p. 13). This project illustrates the interactions between assessment and instruction that are undetectable through traditional methods of evaluation. In this example, assessment not only informed instruction, it helped children to become actively involved in important processes.

Principles of Authentic Classroom Assessment

How do we address authentic assessment? We find it helpful to keep four principles in mind when we think about authentic assessment.

Principle #1: Authentic assessment focuses on meaningful goals.

The first question is "What do we want to measure?" Identifying what is to be measured, however, is often a difficult task. Goals for students can be placed on a continuum ranging from the very broad and general to the extremely specific and narrow. One of the 1992 national education goals, for example, states that students will demonstrate "competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy." This is obviously an important goal, but it is too broad to measure in any manageable way. At the other end of the continuum are very low-level goals that focus on isolated skills: "Students should identify the sound the letter *a* represents in the word *man*." Specific goals like this one are often easy to measure, but they may not be worth the effort.

Developing goals at just the right level on the continuum requires teachers to think about meaningful, authentic outcomes that are observable and useful to those who use the information gained from the assessment. For example, "Students will become more self-reflective about their reading and writing" might be a useful classroom goal for teachers interested in helping students become more independent learners. "Students are able to understand a wide variety of authentic reading materials" might be a useful goal for teachers who want to focus on comprehension. And "Students will develop an interest in reading" might be a useful goal for teachers interested in helping students become lifelong readers.

Even after identifying meaningful goals, teachers must still ensure that the goals actually drive assessment and instruction. What happens too often is that meaningful goals are included in the language of curriculum documents, but the district or school still relies heavily on textbooks and traditional multiple-choice tests. The teachers, then, end up with the textbook and test maker's scope and sequence as their de facto goals of assessment and instruction. Although the curriculum may identify, for example, helping students develop a lifelong love of reading as an important goal, students are evaluated only on their ability to read short paragraphs and select the right answer from a list of choices.

Principle #2: Authentic assessment enhances learning rather than simply serving the purpose of accountability.

One of the most important lessons to learn about assessment is that it can and should serve different purposes (Winograd, Paris, and Bridge 1991). We find it useful to think about the various purposes of assessment in terms of different audiences. Here are some examples of how student assessments can affect different audiences:

- Students become more self-reflective and in control of their own learning.
- Teachers focus their instruction more effectively.
- Educators determine which students are eligible for Chapter 1, programs for the gifted, or special education.
- Parents understand more about their own children's progress as learners.
- Administrators understand how groups of students in their schools are progressing as learners.
- Legislators and other representatives of the public understand how groups of students across the state are progressing as learners.

Each of these audiences, from students to legislators, is important and worthy of the best information possible.

In the past, however, assessment for students has been neglected in favor of assessment for accountability. The primary purpose of authentic assessment is to nurture children's growth in understanding, self-reliance, and confidence (Johnston 1991). Thus, one of the important changes in the way we think about testing is that students are a valuable source of information for teachers as they plan their instruction. Students are also a valid and valuable source of information about a teacher's instruction. We have often heard students say to their teachers, "I don't understand what you mean!" or "That doesn't make sense to me!" or "I thought we did a great presentation this time!" or "This is the best reading I have ever done!" These informal and unplanned remarks inform the teacher about the lesson—its appropriateness, its relevance, or the need to give students further assistance.

We want to stress that assessment for learning and assessment for accountability are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one of the most important aspects of the current wave of educational reform is that assessment for learning and assessment for accountability are aligned. This is an important advance in the way we think about assessment because it assumes that the more we help students become self-reflective and take control of their learning, and the more we help teachers improve their instruction, then the better students will perform on tests of accountability. When properly aligned, assessment for learning and assessment for accountability reinforce one another and focus on similar goals.

Principle #3: Authentic assessment empowers teachers by helping them build the expertise necessary to trust their own professional judgments about learners.

For many years, teachers have made on-the-spot decisions during instruction based on student responses. By observing, listening, and responding to their students, teachers make judgments about whether to continue with a specific type of instruction, adjust their teaching strategy for the lesson, or abandon the lesson until students have built a greater knowledge base. A test after the lesson doesn't allow teachers to make such immediate judgments. We encourage teachers to trust such judgments, but we stress the importance of using authentic assessments as a way of collecting evidence to back up those judgments.

Teachers can also use their professional judgment to consider what types of evidence can form the basis for assessment. As Wiggins (1989, p. 705) asserts, "Do we judge our students to be deficient in writing, speaking, listening, artistic creation, finding and citing evidence, and problem solving? Then let the tests ask them to write, speak, listen, create, do original research, and solve problems."

Principle #4: Authentic assessment provides teachers with richer opportunities to engage in linguistically and culturally appropriate evaluation and instruction.

Cultural diversity must be a consideration when planning for assessment and instruction. Far too often the voices of all children are not heard or validated in instructional activities or assessment. The reasons are rooted in misconceptions and stereotypes about linguistically and culturally diverse learners. King (1993, p. 174) maintains that teachers must commit to "finding out about their students' way of viewing so that they can better understand them and so that they can help their students expand their perceptions and views of the world to include those of other cultures, including that of the larger general society."

Children's language and diverse experiences must be accepted and used as a basis for assessment. For example, teachers may collect children's personal and family stories, which are naturally part of their culture. These stories may be used by the teacher to evaluate a child's awareness of story structure or as a source of information for future instruction.

King also suggests that teachers should consider patterns of social interaction, diverse learning styles, and the ways people use oral and written language

across various cultures. Such considerations would have a direct impact on the way teachers assess and instruct learners. Ultimately, teachers must ask themselves if their assessment and instructional practices appreciate and accept the linguistic and cultural diversity of all learners.

Classroom Strategies for Authentic Assessment

In the remainder of this chapter we examine four authentic assessment strategies: portfolios, observation (with anecdotal records and developmental checklists), student-teacher conferences, and report cards. These by no means exhaust all the possibilities. It is important to note from the beginning that the four strategies are interrelated. The portfolios could contain, among other things, records of the teacher's observations and conferences with students. Portfolios, anecdotal records, and developmental checklists can provide important starting points for discussions among teachers, students, and parents.

Portfolios

Portfolios come in a variety of forms, and each serves a different purpose. One of the most popular types of portfolios is a *best-piece portfolio,* which contains examples of coursework that a student (sometimes with help from the teacher) considers to be of the highest quality.

Another kind of portfolio is a *descriptive portfolio,* which assembles a wide variety of measures on children. For example, teachers in the South Brunswick Public Schools in New Jersey use a descriptive portfolio to help them better document progress for children in grades K–2. These portfolios include self-portraits drawn by the child; interviews with the child and with the parents; the results from the Concepts About Print test; a word awareness writing activity; a reading sample; and a writing sample.

Many teachers are familiar with *process portfolios,* which are an intrinsic part of the writing process advocated by Graves (1983) and others. Process portfolios can contain a variety of products, including finished projects, manuscripts in progress, possible topics for future papers, and lists identifying ways in which the student has grown as a reader and a writer.

Finally, a number of states are requiring teachers to gather *accountability portfolios*. Kentucky, for example, requires teachers and students in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades to assemble portfolios that include a table of contents; a best piece of work; a letter to the reviewer telling why the piece was selected as one of the best; a short story, poem or play; a personal narrative; as well as other samples of writing. This portfolio, along with samples of writing done on demand, provides part of the evidence by which the state judges the quality of instruction.

Best-piece portfolios, descriptive portfolios, process portfolios, and accountability portfolios are not the only kinds of portfolios in use. Nor are they pure types that are clearly distinct from one another. Teachers and students often find that the portfolios they use in class may serve different functions at different times. In actual use, it is often hard to categorize portfolios as purely best-piece, descriptive, or process portfolios.

Portfolios are most effective when they encourage students to become more reflective about and involved in their own learning. Indeed, a number of writers argue that what makes a portfolio a portfolio is that these collections include "student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-evaluation" (Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer 1991, p. 60). Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) also stress that portfolios are not objects, but rather represent the students' ability to engage in the processes of selecting, comparing, self-evaluation, sharing, and goal setting.

Helping children reflect on their own work forms the basis for a rich interplay between assessment and instruction. For example, one experienced teacher, Gretchyn Turpin, had her class come up with ideas about what they thought makes a piece of writing a "best piece." Her students generated the following list:

- Uses imagination.
- The words make good pictures in your mind.
- Uses things that happen in your own life.
- Uses writing rules like periods and capitals.
- Spaces between words.
- Makes you want to keep on reading.

"After writing down these ideas," Turpin told us, "the children were able to evaluate the work in their portfolios with some focus. The audience for this best piece was their own classmates. When they realized that their best pieces would truly circulate among their friends, they became very self-motivated and diligent in their efforts to present their best pieces to their friends in the best possible light. Now when someone reads their best piece in the classroom, the author isn't satisfied unless he or she is getting laughs, gasps, or smiles from the audience. We now choose a best piece about once every two months, which has added a lot of enthusiasm to our writing workshops."

What the students were experiencing in Turpin's class was the essence of assessment for learning rather than assessment for accountability. The opportunity to reflect on their own work leads students to better writing, which in turn leads to more sophisticated reflections on their own work. Students who

have this kind of opportunity learn the most important secrets to becoming a good writer.

Observation: Anecdotal Records and Developmental Checklists

Most of the information that teachers gather about their students comes from observation. Observation can take many forms, from informal observation on the playground to systematic anecdotal records to more structured observations using checklists.

Anecdotal records, developmental checklists, and other forms of observation offer many benefits:

- They provide teachers a way to assess how students interact with a complex environment both in and out of classrooms. Teachers gain a more valid understanding of what each student really knows and can do.
- They provide teachers an efficient method for assessing students in many different situations over long periods of time, thus increasing the reliability of the assessment data.
- They focus the teacher's attention on what the student can do, rather than on what the student has yet to learn.
- They provide a relatively stress-free form of evaluation for students, especially those students who become anxious when they take standardized tests.

Anecdotal records are informal observations about what students are learning, how students are responding to instruction, or any other student behaviors, actions, or reactions that might provide teachers with some insight (Rhodes and Nathenson-Mejia 1992). Anecdotal records often focus on questions such as these:

- What can this child do?
- What does this child know?
- How does this child read, write, work on projects, work with others, or deal with other important aspects of the school curriculum?
- What other kinds of questions does the child have about his or her work?
- What does the child's attitude reveal about his or her growth and progress?

In addition, anecdotal records often include teacher comments and questions that are particularly useful in helping teachers become more reflective about their teaching. Yvonne Siu-Runyan (1991) offers a powerful example of how anecdotal records can help teachers improve their instruction:

> 8/31/87: Most of the children are struggling with their pieces. They want to write grand stories, but don't know enough about their topics to write well. They want to write fiction, and not personal narratives which is what I think would make a difference to them.
>
> 9/2/87: The students are abandoning pieces like mad. Even though I did a lesson on brainstorming ideas for writing topics, most of them are still struggling with topic choice.
>
> 9/14/87: I wish the kids were more interested in writing. They are wasting a lot of time because many don't know what to write about. I am getting worried.
>
> 10/7/87: Kids of concern: Zephyr, Tom, Travis, Geoff, Cara, Ashleigh, Lucas, John, Ben, Missy, Mel, Rojana, and Mike. These kids are still not interested in their writing. I'm beginning to feel like a failure.

When Siu-Runyan reviewed her anecdotal records, she knew that she needed to respond to these children quickly. She also realized that she had not written with the children or modeled how literature helped her own writing. She decided to try modeling the kinds of writing she wanted her students to learn. The following anecdotal records reveal what happened after she spent time modeling writing in response to literature:

> 10/1/87: Lucas and Melissa are writing their own important stories. I am so pleased that they are trying their hand at this. Perhaps now others will use literature to help them learn about writing. Now to keep the momentum going. I must be careful about what books I choose to share. I must remember to select personal narratives with an obvious design. I think this will help the kids a lot.
>
> 10/20/87: Read *My Mom Travels A Lot* (1981) by Caroline Feller Bauer. Discussed the design of the book. Created several stories verbally following the opposite design of this book. Today Cara developed her own story from the model presented. Great!

A developmental continuum is another common and useful tool for observing students' progress in the primary program. A major reason for its appeal is that it can be used in a wide variety of situations. Figure 1 shows an example of such a continuum. Teachers interested in looking at other examples of a developmental continuum will find lots of good ideas in the literature on assessment (e.g., Clay 1985; Harp 1991; Kemp 1989; Routman 1988, 1991; Sharp 1989).

FIGURE 1
SAMPLE DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM

Student name _____ Date _____

Juneau Primary Writing Rubric

	IDEAS AND CONTENT	CONVENTIONS
1	• **Communicates meaning through (single) picture(s).** • Draws/scribbles as writing. • Writes random letters or letter strings.	• **Writes shapes that look like letters.**
2	• **Communicates meaning with pictures supported by a word/label.** and/or • Communicates a story through a related series of pictures. • Writes names of people/things or environmental print.	• **Uses mostly uppercase letters.**
3	• **Begins to communicate meaning with words.** • Communicates meaning to reader through connected words.	• **Writes some recognizable, understandable words.** • Attempts phonetic, temporary/invented spelling (using consonant beginning and/or ending sounds). • Writes left to right, top to bottom. • Begins to use spaces between words.
4	• **Begins to write simple sentences, expressing a complete thought.** • Ideas may be expressed in lists or patterned statements.	• **Writes simple sentences or pattern sentences.** • May use repetitive sentence structure. • Appropriately uses uppercase and lowercase letters. • Begins to use capitals and some punctuation correctly. • Uses vowels in temporary/invented spelling. • Begins to use conventional spelling. • Consistently uses spaces between words.
5	• **Begins to develop story sense.** • Writer's emotion/enthusiasm begins to show. • Displays a sense of beginning and ending. • Sequence of ideas is logical. • Uses specific, accurate, suitable vocabulary.	• **Begins to use a variety of sentence structures.** • Generally uses capitals and periods correctly. • Frequently uses conventional spelling on high-frequency words.
6	• **Begins to add supportive details.** • Generally stays on topic. • Writer's emotion/enthusiasm shows. • Occasionally uses creative or vivid words/phrases appropriately. • Story has a beginning and an end.	• **Uses a wide variety of sentence structures.** • Begins to punctuate correctly. • Consistently uses conventional spelling on most words.
7	• **Write in a convincing, natural style.** • Represents one main, focused idea/topic. • Uses detail(s) to develop idea. • Holds reader's attention. • Organizes story with clear beginning, middle, and end. • Communicates feelings to reader. • Paints a picture in reader's mind. • Experiments with uncommon words and new and/or different ways of saying things.	• **Uses varied and complex sentence syntax (construction of word, phrases, or clause in a sentence).** • Write clearly—paper is easily understood. • Consistently uses punctuation marks and capitalization correctly. • Consistently uses conventional spelling.

NOTE: You can use this rubric with some forms of writing, particularly fiction and nonfiction. If a paper contains only the child's name, it should not be factored into conventions. Pictures may be present at any level.

Conferences

Conferences between teachers and students are another powerful tool in the repertoire of teachers adept at authentic assessment. Conferences can be quick and informal or they can be more structured and systematic. Informal conferences may last from three to four minutes and may focus on something interesting that the teacher has seen or overheard. More structured conferences may take longer and follow a predictable pattern in which students have a good idea of what is expected of them. For example, if the conference is over books read or papers written, then students are familiar with the kinds of questions that will be asked. The important point about conferences of all sorts is that they should be conducted in a safe and comfortable manner so that students feel encouraged to take risks and share their ideas.

Conferences can provide information about many areas:

- What the student is learning
- The student's understanding of reading, writing, mathematics, and other aspects of the primary program curriculum
- The student's interests
- Areas in which the student needs help
- What the teacher is doing that the student believes is particularly helpful
- What the student would like to learn next

Here are some examples of different kinds of conferences and the kinds of information that teachers can learn from them:

Reading Conferences. The teacher can listen to the student read, discuss a book that has been previously read, or talk about the student's book log. These activities enable a teacher to learn about:

- The strategies the student uses
- Whether the student reads for meaning
- Whether the student is developing fluency
- The student's interests
- Whether the student selects reading materials of appropriate difficulty
- Whether the student is reading a variety of genres
- The student's progress in comprehending and retelling what has been read
- The student's ability to justify an opinion about what has been read

Writing Conferences. The teacher can help the student brainstorm topics to write about, discuss early drafts, listen to a student read a paper, or talk about which piece of work the student considers his or her best work. These activities enable teachers to learn:

- How the student is progressing in the use of the writing process
- What the student knows about organization, topic development, mechanics, and spelling
- Whether the student can effectively verbalize opinions, ideas, and feelings
- Whether the student can write for a variety of purposes
- Whether the student can edit drafts to a point where others can understand them

Report Cards

Changing report cards to accurately communicate a child's progress is one of the most important challenges facing teachers who use authentic assessment. The following suggestions may prove helpful to teachers and principals as they revise their report cards to reflect current assessment practices:

- Include a clear statement of the philosophy and the goals of the primary program.
- Focus on the child's growth in all areas throughout the year.
- Avoid blame and harmful labels.
- Accentuate the developmental nature of learning.
- Address areas of concern (if and when they are identified) in a constructive manner.
- Include space for the teacher to write narrative descriptions.
- Include space for parents to comment and respond.

The Saffell Street School Primary Progress Report, shown in Figure 2, is a creative example of a report card that reflects authentic assessment. It is an exemplary report card for a number of reasons. First, the teachers have identified the important *goals* in their curriculum. For example, they want their students to display an interest in reading and writing; engage in important classroom activities, including Super Silent Reading, group reading, reading discussion, and writing workshop; apply important skills and strategies in reading writing, math, listening, and speaking; and develop appropriate personal and social behaviors.

Second, the teachers at Saffell Street School use *rubrics* to help parents understand the developmental nature of learning. Here, for example, is a rubric that focuses on a student's performance during a reading discussion:

FIGURE 2

SAFFELL STREET SCHOOL PRIMARY PROGRESS REPORT

Student _____ Teacher _____

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

DISPLAYS INTEREST IN PRINT
- ___ shares books with others
- ___ chooses to spend time with books
- ___ asks to be read to
- ___ listens attentively to books in a group
- ___ contributes to group discussions
- ___ checks out books frequently

DURING SUPER SILENT READING

Involves self intensely with print	Maintains interest in print with additional support	Has difficulty being involved with print

DURING GROUP READING

Totally involved with reading experiences	Willing to participate with additional support	Unable to stay involved with group activity

DURING READING DISCUSSIONS

Carries on a meaningful conversation about reading	Willing to answer questions about reading material with guidance	Unable to express thoughts or feelings about reading material

DISPLAYS INTEREST IN WRITING
- ___ chooses to write or draw
- ___ wants more writing time
- ___ wants to share their writing
- ___ shows interest in others' writing
- ___ uses available print

DURING WRITING WORKSHOP

Shows independence using the writing process	Shows some independence, needing individual guidance to progress	Needs individual guidance to participate

STORY DEVELOPMENT

Develops and organizes ideas with a purpose	Expresses logical and sequential thoughts and ideas; needs to develop a clearer purpose	Expresses ideas; may or may not be logically connected

KNOWLEDGE OF MECHANICS

Able to use punctuation, capitals, grammar, and complete sentences	Shows some use of punctuation, grammar and complete sentences, but not consistently	Needs awareness of punctuation, capitals, grammar and complete sentences

READING STRATEGIES (e.g., clues, context, background knowledge, prediction, phonics)

Uses a variety of reading strategies	Beginning to use one or more reading strategies	Unaware of reading strategies

STEPS IN READING
- ___ listening to stories, unaware of print and its function
- ___ picture reading, describing pictures
- ___ pretends reading, turning pages, tracking print, rehearsing silently
- ___ memory reading
- ___ recognizes some words but not all
- ___ recognizes patterns in reading
- ___ reading with understanding, summarizes

(continued on next page)

FIGURE 2—*continued*

SAFFELL STREET SCHOOL PRIMARY PROGRESS REPORT

Student _____ Teacher _____

MATH

PROBLEM SOLVING

Able to problem solve independently	Can use problem solving with some guidance	Needs assistance to solve problems

COMMUNICATES MEANING

Uses symbols and words to show meaning	Uses symbols and/or words, needs assistance to show meaning	Needs assistance to use symbols and/or words to show meaning

NUMBER UNDERSTANDING

Demonstrates and extends understanding about number meaning	Demonstrates understanding about number meaning	Beginning to show an awareness of number meaning

LISTENING AND SPEAKING

FOLLOWS DIRECTIONS

Almost always follows directions independently	Working to develop better listening skills to follow through with directions	Needs constant assistance in following directions

COMMUNICATES IDEAS VERBALLY

Willing and able to communicate effectively with others	Willing to express thoughts; working to develop a clearer focus	Needs encouragement to express ideas

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL GROWTH

USE OF TIME

Is productive and involved	Sometimes needs encouragement to use time productively	Needs assistance to become involved in productive activities

EFFECTIVE GROUP MEMBER

Works well with others	Needs limited assistance to work with others	Has difficulty working with others

COOPERATES WITH PEERS AND SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Shows respect, gets along well with others	Needs encouragement with limited guidance	Needs constant reminding of how to cooperate

Parents! Please write a home goal for your child. It may be something that you will continue to work on during this next reporting period.

Sign and return _____ Date _____

During reading discussion [the student]:

carries on a meaningful conversation about reading.	is willing to answer questions about reading material with guidance.	is unable to express thoughts or feelings about reading material.

As you can see, the rubric shows parents the continuum of developmental behaviors that the teacher is looking for as children grow. Beginning students are unable to clearly express their thoughts about what they have read. Developing students can answer questions about what they have read, but teachers still must provide some modeling and support. Independent students can discuss what they have read with ease and confidence.

Abandoning traditional marking systems that label students "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" or give them simple letter grades is an important step for educators committed to making real changes in the ways we conceptualize assessment. Terms like "unsatisfactory" or letter grades like "F" suggest that young students are failures. Developmental rubrics, in contrast, suggest that the student still has time to grow. They also give students and parents a clear idea of the school's expectations.

The move from letter grades to scoring systems that communicate the developmental nature of young children's learning is crucial. Although letter grades indicating clear success or failure may sometimes be appropriate for older students and adults (for instance, in evaluating whether a pilot-in-training has the knowledge and skills needed to fly a plane), they are never appropriate for young children. The philosophy underlying authentic assessment holds that it is wrong to characterize young children as failures simply because they lack certain kinds of knowledge or cannot do specific tasks. Rather, we should view children as inexperienced and provide them more support and opportunities to grow.

Here's a straightforward method of developing your own rubrics:

1. Identify a key instructional task or activity in your classroom (e.g., group reading, writing workshops, cooperative groups working on projects, etc.).

2. Think about some specific students in your class who do very well on this task or activity. Write down some descriptive phrases that capture what they do. These phrases should be placed at the left side of the rubric.

3. Now think about some specific students in your class who have yet to learn how to complete the task or participate in the activity. Write down some descriptive phrases that capture what they do (or cannot do). These phrases should be placed at the right side of the rubric.

4. Finally, fill in the middle of the rubric with phrases that describe students who can do the task or activity occasionally or with support.

Another important section of the Saffell Street School Primary Progress Report is the space allowed for narratives written by the teacher. These brief reports help parents gain a more personal view of their child. Here are teachers' comments about students we'll call Tom and Jenny:

> I love having reading conferences with Tom. He has really begun to be able to discuss a book. He comprehends the story well. We discussed character feelings in Fuzzy Rabbit. He is excellent at reading silent to answer content questions. His oral reading is very fluent and improved.

> Jenny says she likes looking at books and reading but she doesn't like to read at home. She would be helped a great deal if she would just read 10 minutes a night (read to her). Her goal in reading is to "get books she could read."

The Saffell Street School Primary Progress Report also includes a place for parents to write a home goal for the student. Here is what Tom's mother wrote:

> Thanks for the report. We'll work with Tom on speaking in front of people and telling stories.

The opportunity for parent responses provides teachers with some important insights about the children and their families. Consider these examples from different parents:

> My goal for Linda is to have more individual time with her, to have her read to me more & to let her help me cook more (she likes that). She & I made banana bread a few weeks ago. She helped me follow the recipe, get ingredients prepared, & clean up. We had a good time.

> I don't know what's happening but Alex is not wanting to go to school now, he says he is bored. He has been complaining for about the last 2 weeks. I told him to talk to you but of course he won't. I don't know what to do.

> I let Bill know that I am very proud of him. He has done very good. My home goal is to help Bill with his behavior and working with others. Thank you.

A Comfortable Fit

Teachers interested in finding more effective methods of helping their students learn will find much of value in the principles and practices of authentic assessment. Teachers will also find that much of what they do already fits comfortably with

the strategies suggested in this chapter and elsewhere in this book.

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