In this chapter we address diversity and literacy assessment. We conceptualize diversity broadly, seeking to illustrate the complexities that are involved in conducting and using assessment in support of all students. It is critical to acknowledge the situated nature of literacy assessment, and the diversity of factors that influence the ways and means of assessment. To this end, we consider diversity in the purposes and audiences of assessment, and in the contexts of assessment. We examine the diverse manner in which the English language arts are defined and how related curriculum is conceptualized. We conclude with consideration of the diverse students and teachers whose lives are influenced by assessment, and the diverse array of assessments that contribute to effective teaching and student learning.

Diversity in the Audiences and Purposes of English Language Arts Assessment

Assessment must serve diverse audiences and purposes, and the overriding purpose of all English language arts assessment should be to foster students’ learning and growth. However, different audiences have different purposes for assessment: Teachers want formative assessment that describes students’ individual needs and accomplishments and guides instruction, while legislators want test scores to inform policy-making and allocation of funding. Parents want information that helps them understand both students’ daily and weekly progress, as well as year-end standing in relation to standards and peers (Shepard & Bliem, 1995). The diverse audiences and purposes for literacy assessment are illustrated in Table 44.1. We note that the diversity of audiences is not always considered in a systematic or egalitarian manner when literacy assessment is planned, created, and implemented. This creates situations in which these audiences may be in competition with one another; addressing the needs of one audience takes limited school resources, and may narrow the diversity of assessments used, and thus, of the particular audiences served by assessment. For example, funds spent on summative testing are funds that cannot be spent on helping students learn to use rubrics and performance assessments to evaluate complex classroom performances (Calkins, Montgomery, Santman, & Falk, 1998).

Assessment should serve diverse purposes, each contributing to students’ English language arts growth. A classic distinction in the purpose of assessment is formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment provides information on individual students and their progress as they learn (Sadler, 1989), while summative assessment provides after-the-fact summaries of learning. The information yielded in formative assessment can be used by the teacher to maintain or revise a lesson, adjusting instruction to the student’s needs. For example, teacher questioning can help us understand the effectiveness of a critical reading lesson as it takes place, with student responses to questions illustrating the nature of student understanding, or the locus of a student’s difficulty. The teacher who conducts formative assessment during the critical reading lesson may determine that some students are able to identify claims and evidence in text, while others are not. Using this information, the teacher can adjust the lesson, re-teaching those students who need further instruction. Formative assessment, in the hands of talented teachers, provides information that can help shape diverse students’ learning and achievement.

In contrast, summative assessment gives a summary statement of achievement and focuses on the products of students’ literacy processes. Summative assessments are typically conducted at the end of lessons, units, marking periods and school years. They provide a gauge of students’ learning in relation to daily goals, standards, benchmarks and longer term learning goals. Tests typically provide summative information—they are taken at the end of a learning episode, be it a chapter quiz, or a unit performance assessment. In some instances, an assessment may ably serve both purposes, as when performance assessments, with
TABLE 44.1

The Diverse Audiences and Purposes for Literacy Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>To report on learning and communicate progress&lt;br&gt;To motivate and encourage&lt;br&gt;To teach children about assessment and how to assess their own work and progress&lt;br&gt;To build student independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>To determine nature of student learning&lt;br&gt;To inform instruction&lt;br&gt;To construct grades and narrative reports&lt;br&gt;To evaluate students&lt;br&gt;To diagnose student strengths and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>To understand their child’s achievement&lt;br&gt;To help connect home and school efforts to support student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School administrators</td>
<td>To determine instructional program effectiveness&lt;br&gt;To prove school and teacher accountability&lt;br&gt;To allocate school resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>To establish accountability of schools&lt;br&gt;To inform the public of school progress&lt;br&gt;To determine funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxpayers</td>
<td>To demonstrate that tax dollars are well spent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


the use of scoring rubrics, guide teachers’ understanding of student development in complex learning (formative), and also serve as the primary indicator of what a student was able to do and accomplish (summative). A functional literacy assessment system focuses on both formative and summative assessment.

A complementary perspective on assessment purpose focuses on the roles of reporting, supporting and teaching. Much of the assessment conducted in schools is used for reporting. For example, Running Records provides formative, process-oriented information to a classroom teacher on students’ oral reading, fluency, decoding ability and comprehension. This information may be used to shape instruction: teaching the next lesson, or planning the next unit. A standardized test reports on a student’s knowledge about reading or related school topics such as social studies or science, and this information is used typically to judge student, teacher and school achievement levels.

From a sociocultural perspective (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) to learn literacy involves changes in student identity. Such shifts can be positive or negative, they can open up or shut out a learner from access to power, and they may be influenced by assessment. Learners may gain agency as they become recognized as members of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or they may perceive a lack of control as instructional practices and assessments communicate to them that they cannot effectively access, or participate fully in these communities. Thus, assessment’s role in reporting can impact student identities; for example, weekly summative tests may communicate to students their understanding relative to peers. Students who have not been given sufficient opportunities or resources to learn may, in turn, internalize an identity, as defined by an assessment, as an incapable or less able learner. In this case the assessment may mask the true source of the economic and social inequities that shape the different assessment outcomes, in turn labeling the student as deficient rather than recognizing that societal power structures influence access to equitable educational experiences. In this case assessment serves to uphold rather than challenge social injustice. From a Bourdeian standpoint (Heller, 2008), such analyses of assessment’s role in upholding hegemony is necessary for the educator concerned with educational equity.

Consider a second purpose for assessment: the support that assessment can provide for the diversity of students in a classroom. Some students receive consistently good news from assessment, some do not. The student whose assessment information consistently communicates “A,” “94 percentile,” and “Excellent work,” is supported with positive feedback for successful performance. In contrast, a student whose assessment feedback includes “C,” “36 percentile,” “Needs improvement,” or corrective, red ink on written work is less likely to feel supported. The supporting role of assessment may not exist for particular students, when students are regularly ranked in relation to one another. Thus, consideration of whether or not language arts assessment contributes to positive student self-concept and self-esteem is critical. Encouraging students in relation to assessment helps students understand that their effort leads to learning (Johnston, 2004), as when teacher feedback helps student writers focus on how their hard work contributes to increasingly compelling writing.

Assessments can be used to support student learning and insure marginalized students’ access to power by holding teachers and schools accountable for student performance. Yet, as is evident in the percentile rankings mentioned in the above, assessment may promote what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) called “symbolic domination.” Students’ views of self are shaped by tests that label them as “deficient” or “slow.” In some cases, the authoritative veneer of tests may mask the reality that student performance is influenced by conflicting cultural models (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), differing forms of language or literacy (Heller, 2008), or lack of opportunity to learn. In contrast, assessment can be a tool of support and safe, constructive critique that encourages students to further develop positive identities and join diverse communities of practice.

A third, often unrealized purpose for assessment is teaching (Afflerbach, 2002). A hallmark of the successful student is independence, and this independence derives, in part, from the ability to assess one’s self (Flavell, 1976; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). When we conceptualize language arts assessment as a means of teaching assessment, we can provide students with increasing opportunity (and related strategies and motivations) to work independently. Each of our diverse students must be encouraged to develop such independence and success. The student writer who
Diversity in How the English Language Arts Are Defined and How Curriculum Is Conceptualized

How are the English language arts conceptualized? The past century of educational research has broadly expanded definitions of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Conceptualizations of language learning and its discrete, isolable, and universally applicable skills, have been replaced, in some quarters, with more complex descriptions of what literacy is. Constructivist theory, sociological and anthropological inquiry, critical literacy scholarship, and critical sociocultural theory have great potential to diversify how the English language arts are conceptualized, enacted and assessed. They reveal reading and writing instruction to be more than a science or a process but “language arts”: diverse ways of using reading, writing, speaking, and listening to express and communicate.

Diverse theories of literacy demand a diverse understanding of curriculum and assessment. That students’ literacy is situated within complex networks of language use, learning and power should encourage us to continuously ask “Why”; “For whose benefit?”; “What for?”; and “With what consequences for whom?” when we consider both language arts curriculum and assessment. Taking this proactive stance with assessment allows us to determine, a priori, what assessments may be most useful. For example, asking “For whose benefit?” when we consider our assessment regimen may reveal a balance (or imbalance) in how teachers’, students’, and parents’ assessment needs are met
(or not met). Beneath particular assessment procedures may be conceptions of literacy that teach students that they are capable or incapable, that students can take action to transform society or passively accept things the way they are, that students’ cultural ways of knowing count or don’t count, and that literacy is or is not connected to their identities and their diverse understandings of the world (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Thus, assessments that help us understand our students in relation to their homes and communities, in addition to school curriculum, are necessary (Johnson, Willeke, & Steiner, 1998).

The diverse definitions of literacy that we embrace matter in relation to assessment because they limit or expand the construct that we would assess. For example, if the English language arts are viewed as tools for constructing meaning in relation to acts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, then assessment might focus on students’ constructed responses, allowing for divergent student language performances. If the English language arts are viewed as social practices that open up access to codes of power, then assessments should focus on literacy practices that empower students, as when making persuasive arguments. If the English language arts are viewed as tools of critical literacy, then assessments and assessment tasks should require students to take part in such critique, as when they are asked to evaluate claims and evidence in spoken and written text. In contrast, if a transmission model of English language arts is predominant, curriculum and instruction will focus on the delivery of course material, and assessment, particularly multiple-choice items and literal questions will focus on how well students learn, remember, and give back this course content. If the means and goals of language learning are considered dependent on skill and strategy instruction, then assessment of these discreet parts of language will follow.

Diversity in Teachers’ Assessment Development and Expertise

Useful classroom assessment demands expertise. However, there is great diversity in teachers’ knowledge of assessment and their ability to conduct valid and reliable assessment (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). This is due, in part, to inconsistent initial training in effective classroom assessment, and inconsistent professional development opportunities to gain knowledge of assessment theory and practice. When the reliability and validity of teacher assessment of the processes and products of language learning are established, classroom assessment can be extremely useful, as demonstrated by Running Records (Clay, 2002), process approaches to writing instruction and assessment, and listening to students (Schultz, 2003). The success of such teacher assessment of the language arts revolves around rigorous initial teacher development and ongoing professional development.

Formative and summative assessments demand that teachers be evaluation experts (Johnston, 1987). This expertise helps teachers use assessments in the course of daily instruction to shape instruction for the diversity of students. For example, the teacher who is a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983) regularly compares the goals of instruction with the status of student learning. Formative assessment provides the detailed information with which the teacher makes this comparison. Formative assessment plays a similar role in the classroom teacher’s attempts to create teachable moments that benefit all students. Teachable moments are commonly associated with Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, in which students and teachers work to move from a current level of attainment to the next possible level of attainment. A teacher may scaffold instruction in relation to students’ learning and strategies (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The success of the scaffolding depends on the teachers’ ability to assess and identify diverse students’ current levels of capability and their next steps in ongoing achievement. For example, the teacher who in the midst of a lesson determines that a particular student has not yet learned an aspect of public speaking can modify the lesson, address the student’s particular need for increased confidence and articulation, and then continue, with positive cognitive and affective outcomes. Lacking this information, the student will not learn, and may become frustrated, embarrassed and unmotivated.

Validity and Assessment

There are several forms of validity for assessment (Messick, 1989). Two of the most important forms are construct validity and consequential validity. Construct validity relates to how faithfully and comprehensively an assessment represents the thing we would measure (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001). For example, a multiple-choice test can inform us about how well students are learning constrained skills of reading, such as sound-symbol correspondences, and determining literal meaning of text, but may be incapable of reporting on students’ higher order thinking, given the constraints on multiple choice items (Afflerbach, Cho, Kim, & Clark, 2010). In such instances, the assessment may be “thin” (Davis, 1998), thereby accurately assessing a part of what it means to be a reader, but missing other important parts. If assessment includes tasks that require students to critically evaluate an author’s claims, or to synthesize information from different sources, the construct of reading may be more fully sampled.

Consequential validity is a term originally coined to focus on the results of the use of test scores (Tittle, 2005), including the labeling of diverse students as “above average” or “below average,” schools as “outperforming” or “underperforming” and teachers as “accountable” or “unaccountable,” for students learning. However, we believe that a broader application of the term, including the consequences of conducting assessment and the use of all assessment information, is critical to establishing useful English language arts assessments. Assessment that helps teachers teach students how to conduct self-assessment has considerable positive consequence (Black & Wiliam, 1998),
as does assessment that contributes to a student’s positive self-image. In contrast, assessments that portray significant numbers of students as “below average” or “failing” may have negative consequence. In relation to the Hippocratic oath, we believe that assessment should do no harm: no assessment should have punitive consequences for any of the diverse students we teach.

Assessing the Diversity of Factors that Contribute to Students’ English Language Arts Learning

The English language arts are central to students’ cognitive, affective, and social growth, yet assessment focuses predominantly on cognitive skill and strategy development. Effective assessment can describe students’ current affective and social characteristics, their ongoing growth in these areas, and this information complements the often-exclusive focus on cognitive achievement. Theories of teaching and learning increasingly describe the power and importance of positive affect and volition for student achievement (Cornu & Mandinach, 2004). Student self-esteem and self-concept figure largely in motivation to participate in school, and engaged participation is central to academic achievement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Thus, it is important to consider the student characteristics that support (or work against) language use and growth, and to determine how assessment of these characteristics can contribute to successful school experiences. Extant assessments, including those that focus on motivation (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996), student reader self-concept (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995), and attitudes towards reading (McKenna & Kear, 1990) help us understand the multifaceted development of students’ literacy.

Language use is social, and the development of students’ social uses for literacy are worthy of assessment. Discussions of important issues, reading and reacting to reviews of books and movies, turn-taking in conversations, respect for others’ ideas and opinions are important markers in an individual’s language and social development. Without a related focus on how literacy is used, we may mistake students’ skill and strategy development as the ability to use language to achieve diverse goals. The lesson is that the preponderance of current assessment that focuses on cognitive skills and strategies must be complemented by assessment that focuses on the situated use of skills and strategies (Baxter & Glaser, 1998), and on students’ affective and social development in relation to literacy. Here, our ability to make detailed classroom observations of student growth, and to ask pertinent questions will enhance our full assessment of literacy development.

Assessing Diverse Students

There is no “average” student (Artley, 1981): each is a unique blend of cognitive, affective, and social characteristics, influenced by past experience and learning, and situated in complex cultural milieu. Our classrooms are comprised of students with diverse individual differences. Assessment must describe the diversity of student characteristics before, during and after instruction and learning, and it must do so with sensitivity to students’ socio-cultural backgrounds, language experiences, strengths and needs. The influences on individual student’s reading development are diverse, and reading assessment must recognize and measure these influences.

One approach to addressing diverse students’ needs is to designate specific types of diversity, including English language learner (ELL) and learning disabled (LD). We believe that as each student is unique, and that attention to individual differences, as informed by assessment, is at the center of effective instruction and learning. Thus, we argue that the assessment attention given to students who are legally entitled to it should serve as a model and reminder: The model is one of collecting comprehensive and useful assessment information for each and every student, and the reminder is that each and every student is entitled to such assessment efforts. Accommodation is about knowing our students, gathering information that helps us best understand what assessment situations will provide us with the most useful information, and expertly using this information.

Literacy assessment must be conducted with sensitivity to the special nature of each student, and the general accommodations that can be afforded to groups and individuals. When we attend to diverse student characteristics in an a priori manner, all students may have productive assessment experiences and the assessment provides accurate accounts of their development and achievement. Zuriff (2000) claims that many unaccommodated students work at a maximum level of performance within the usual timeframe of a standardized test, while accommodated LD students demonstrate significantly better performance on untimed tests. Following, accommodation for LD students, including extra time to take tests, can provide students with a “differential boost” (Phillips, 1994), enhancing their performance more than the performance of unaccommodated students.

There is need for research that examines accommodation in classroom assessment, because most accommodation research focuses on standardized tests (Stansfield, 2002). Yet, the test-centric accommodation research base deserves consideration. Olson, Mead, and Payne (2002) found that the most common accommodations for LD students include testing in small groups, paraphrasing test instructions and content, extending time to take tests, taking dictation from a student, and reading tests aloud to students. Assessment accommodation of ELL students includes the linguistic modification of test instructions and items (with the intent of making the language of the assessment more understandable), glossaries of key words and terms in tests’ reading selections, and extra time to take the assessment (Abedi, Lord, & Plummer, 1997; Abedi, Lord, Hofstetter, & Baker, 2001).

Abedi and his colleagues (Abedi et al., 1997; Abedi et al., 2001) suggest four foci that can guide the accommodation...
of assessment, including validity, effectiveness, differential impact and feasibility. Attention to validity helps us discern if the provision of an accommodation alters the construct being measured—for example, when a reading test is read aloud to a student it transforms the reading test into a listening test (Stretch & Osborne, 2005). Should the accommodation change the construct, it is important to document the specifics of this change and to use this information in the interpretation of assessment results. Effectiveness focuses on what (and how) accommodations best diminish differences in the assessment performances of ELL and non-ELL students (or LD and non-LD students). Differential impact focuses on how accommodation may place some students at disadvantage, as when the provision of extra time benefits accommodated students, but gives them an advantage over unaccommodated students. Feasibility is a final consideration, as making accommodation of diverse students during assessment requires new resource distributions, and adds a new layer of adjustment, administration and analysis to the assessment enterprise.

We note that LD and ELL students are entitled to receive assessment accommodation, in accordance with Federal laws and mandates. As students meet specific criteria for inclusion, they are accommodated. Yet, this process may leave many diverse students who are deserving of some accommodation just beyond the reach of being accommodated, as if the student is not quite “ELL enough,” or “LD enough.” These students, as well as their legally designated peers, can be accommodated in literacy assessment routines that attend to individual differences. For example, the teacher who repeats assessment instructions, or provides varied wait time for students answering questions, based on an accurate appraisal of students’ current level of competence, is practicing accommodation.

Characteristics of Effective Assessment

Given the range of diversities that successful assessment must negotiate, we are fortunate to have a broad array of assessment materials and procedures. In this section, we describe characteristics of successful assessment, including the ability to address students’ formative and summative information, to describe students’ cognitive, affective and social development. How is assessment useful? Those who use assessments and the information they yield are interested in better understanding their students. We conceptualize this process as constructing meaning with assessment information. Each teacher, parent, student and school administrator constructs understanding with assessment data. Thus, a goal for all users of assessment is the accurate appraisal of students’ current level of competence, is practicing accommodation.

References


Diversity and English Language Arts Assessment


