Every student has been raised in a culture and is cultured. Assessment is more than testing; it is based on a deep knowledge of a child's patterns of success and failure and an understanding of their worldview. (Hilliard, 1995, p. x)

Hilliard’s words remind us that the way we think about language arts assessment must be restructured to fit the changing literacy demands of current classrooms (Edwards, Turner, & Mokhtari, 2008; Johnston, 2005). Language arts teachers are working with more students of diverse ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, (e.g., African American, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American) in their classrooms, and the diversity in our K–12 schools is expected to grow exponentially over the next few decades (Au, 2006). In addition to changing student demographics, language arts assessment must now address complex issues like socio-emotional and relational aspects of literacy development because we recognize that literacy is more than a child’s score on a test.

Currently, we use language arts assessment as a means of data collection, but we often neglect the purpose of that data collection. Purposeful assessment of students requires ongoing and comprehensive data collection that enables language arts teachers to accurately determine students' existing proficiencies, to identify potential areas of challenge, and to tailor instruction to address those strengths and needs (Afflerbach, 2007b; Stiggins, 2007). Clearly, the purposes of language arts assessment may vary depending on the audience, including teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers (Afflerbach, 2007a), and in order to construct a comprehensive and continuous portrait of each individual learner, multiple assessments should be administered in consideration of those multiple purposes. Like Nutbrown (1999), we believe that “clarity of purpose is crucial if assessment….is to be properly understood, and if future assessment instruments are to be authentic” (p. 33).

In this chapter, we outline three purposes for classroom teachers’ administration of language arts assessments that are well-established in the field: (a) assessment of learning; (b) assessment for learning; and (c) assessment of the learner. Specifically, we offer examples of assessments given for each purpose aimed at recognizing language arts proficiencies connected to diversity and culture. We also advocate that a fourth purpose of language arts assessment, assessment of the learners’ social worlds, must be considered in order for language arts teachers to understand the rich insights and perspectives that can be offered by the caregivers in the home and community.

**Purpose 1: Assessment of Learning**

Assessment of learning does not typically coincide with theories of constructivist learning (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008) because most summative assessments do not measure active learning or distinguish how students construct their own understandings. Although summative assessments may not have tangible benefits for students, they are necessary to provide evidence of student learning. Afflerbach (2007a) believes summative assessments provide educators with a summary of student achievement. He argues that summative assessments can, “help us take measure of student achievement in relation to reading curriculum goals and district or state learning standards” (p. 49). High-stakes mandated tests like ones administered through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or through individual states are the most common summative assessments in public schools across the United States. They provide the educational community with students' proficiencies in those districts. However, research has demonstrated that those tests are not sensitive to diverse populations (Artiles, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Hilliard, 1995), and this shift to a business-like model, where students are regularly assessed in order to place them into “appropriate” programs with one-size-fits-all curricula, instruction, and assessment, leaves little room for language arts educators’ adjustments to meet students’ needs.
Fortunately, an authentic assessment approach allows teachers to address real-world applications of students’ evolving literacies (Frey & Schmidt, 2007). A more authentic, summative approach that honors the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive diversity of each learner allows language arts teachers to use assessment data to reflect the scope of students’ cultural backgrounds and the curriculum being taught in the classroom (Bukowiecki, 2007). Although there is some debate about the purposes and definitions of portfolios and performance assessments, both forms of assessment can, in many circumstances, be considered authentic (Affl erbach, 2007a; Guthrie, Van Meter, & Mitchell, 1994).

**Portfolio Assessments** Portfolios are collections of student artifacts that provide evidence about the “range, depth, and trajectory of student performance” (Garcia & Pearson, 1994, p. 356). Researchers distinguish among four types of portfolio assessment: (a) showcase portfolio; (b) documentation portfolio; (c) process portfolio; and (d) evaluation portfolio (Valencia & Place, 1993). In particular, the documentation portfolio is a valuable summative tool because it details students’ completed work over time (Affl erbach, 2007a) and offers insight into the process of students’ development. Tierney and Clark (1998) argue that portfolios provide short and long term evidence of emerging patterns, are grounded in classroom practices, and offer rich depictions of student progress.

Portfolios can incorporate information from across contexts and sources such as work samples, completed artifacts, and audio/video examples. Kong and Fitch (2002/2003) illustrate how portfolios can turn assessment into a tool of learning for students by organizing and challenging them to critically engage in reading, speaking, writing, and listening around texts. Moreover, portfolios offer language arts teachers a chance to involve the student in the assessment process because portfolios require students’ input and enable them to become navigators of their own literacy growth. By involving the learner in the assessment process, language arts teachers are granting them ownership (Barrett, 2007).

Specifically, portfolio assessments are important to diverse populations of students, because cultural resources can be celebrated, particularly if they include parent contributions such as homework samples, drawings, books read at home, and other home artifacts that illustrate students’ achievement gains (Spinelli, 2008).

**Performance-based Assessments** Performance-based assessments are the collection of educational artifacts “that call for students to produce responses similar to those required in instructional environments” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 182). These assessments allow for the examination of students’ processes and help communicate instructional expectations to students, reflect authentic literacy tasks, and provide evidence of students’ accomplishments in relation to learning objectives (Guthrie, Van Meter, & Mitchell, 1994). Typically, they require students to design, perform, or produce (Pennsylvania Literacy Framework, 2000).

The production of story boards or posters, and a student’s ability to follow written directions are all examples of performances that can be used as assessments. Process-focused performance assessments consist of techniques such as “think alouds,” where students communicate their mental processes in an effort to help them identify how they construct meaning from text. Although the above performance assessments enable language arts teachers to determine students’ literacy understandings, we want to specifically highlight the use of dramatizations and student self-evaluations as two possible assessments to use with students with varying backgrounds.

**Dramatizations.** A dramatization in a language arts classroom is any performance or re-creation of text, such as a staging of *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China* (Young, 1989), which would allow students to demonstrate their comprehension, oral reading fluency, or literacy understandings of the text. Researchers have demonstrated that dramatizations can be used with children in early childhood classrooms through secondary classrooms and beyond (Morrison & Chilcoat, 1998). A variation of dramatizations is curriculum-based reader’s theatre (Flynn, 2004), which uses student and teacher-created scripts that specifically address state standards, curriculum, and interdisciplinary themes. Dramatizations can offer language arts teachers valuable opportunities to assess important reading and writing skills that would not necessarily be feasible through typical summative assessments.

**Student Self-Assessments.** Typically, student self-assessments are a process-driven evaluation system where students have the ability to use assessments to change their behaviors, set-goals, and redirect their learning efforts. Although that is often a distinction of a formative assessment, upon the completion of a unit, semester, or year, students can certainly reflect back on the learning that took place and assess their abilities in relation to their starting point. Researchers have found that students can accurately assess reading and writing learning such as their comprehension strategy use (Moore, Lin-Agler, & Zabrucky, 2005), as well as their own writing processes and final products (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008). Johnston (2005) supports the idea of incorporating self-assessments into a classroom assessment system because they give students control over their own learning and help to build resilient readers. Self-assessments, dramatizations, and portfolios provide language arts teachers with important evidence of learning.

**Purpose 2: Assessment for Learning**

Heritage (2007) defines formative assessment as, “a systematic process to continuously gather evidence about learning...where students are active participants with their teachers, sharing learning goals and understanding how their learning is progressing, what next steps to take and how to take them” (p. 141). Formative assessments should yield
descriptive data that can be used to improve instruction and influence student learning (Afflerbach, 2007b) that target specific, finely grained learning goals rather than broad academic standards (Gallagher & Worth, 2008). Formative assessments contribute to classrooms with diverse populations because language arts teachers can “gather evidence about how students are approaching, processing, and completing tasks in a particular domain” (Garcia & Pearson, 1994, p. 357) and use that information to shape classroom practice. Many well-planned and well-executed assessments can sometimes serve as both an assessment of learning and an assessment for learning; however, formative assessments are important to teachers because the information gleaned impacts the instructional process.

**Dynamic Assessments** Dynamic assessment is a unique form of K–12 assessment with characteristics that include an application of students’ learning processes and a test-teach-retest format (Macrine & Sabbatino, 2008; Spinelli, 2008). Although dynamic assessments can also function as an assessment of learning, they tend to be a more process-oriented strategy, because they inform classroom practice. One of the major distinctive attributes is that the examiner becomes a sort of mediator who attempts to elicit the student’s “modifiability as a response to environmental efforts for change” (Tzuriel, 2000, p. 387). Research has demonstrated that dynamic assessments improve learners’ level of performance and achievement on reading tasks (Tzuriel, 2000) by attending to the abilities rather than the disabilities of the learner (Tzuriel & Kauffman, 1999).

The evaluator is responsible for providing and removing support, as needed, to obtain information regarding the child’s reading ability and assess both the processes and the products of learning. An example of using dynamic assessment for reading could include an assessment of a student’s comprehension. After asking the student to describe the main idea of a new text, the evaluator can remove the supports and assess the child’s understanding of the material by having the child express the main idea of a new text. Dynamic assessments are valuable for students of diverse backgrounds because, when in the hands of teachers who are continually reflecting how bias operates, the assessments can be (a) less biased toward experiences, social practices, or literacy understandings (Laing & Kamhi, 2003); (b) more fair than conventional product-oriented methods (Macrine & Sabbatino, 2008); and (c) offer guided support with a mediator that interacts with the student (Spinelli, 2008).

**Checklists and Rating Scales** Checklists and rating scales are tools that language arts teachers can use in classrooms to identify the skills students are employing at any given time, and serve as a way to accumulate anecdotal evidence of embedded student learning by providing a means of recording student literacy processes, rather than outcomes. Checklists and rating scales provide informal assessment information that illustrates how a child performs in the classroom on a day-to-day basis. Like many quality assessments, checklists and rating scales can also assess student learning outcomes; however, they often function to provide teachers with valuable data to inform instruction. One major benefit of checklists is their versatility, because they can be used in a number of settings and for a number of purposes (Paratore & McCormack, 2005). Recorded student behaviors can provide important insight into why and how children act under certain conditions, which is particularly important in diverse classrooms. Checklists offer language arts teachers a closer view of “students’ skills, strategies, and work as they unfold,” (Afflerbach, 2007b, p. 269) as opposed to solely focusing on what is produced as a result of reading.

By using checklists, classroom teachers can determine children’s individual assets and challenges in ways that reveal constructive information for guiding instruction. Furthermore, student checklists and rating scales that include rubrics help support student understandings of teacher expectations and foster self-regulatory behaviors (Massey, 2003). Romeo (2008) describes a checklist to assess student’ writing, by keeping track of students’ goal setting, to document students’ progress, and to aid students in remembering to follow the steps of the revision process. Checklists and dynamic assessments are relevant for students with a wide range of backgrounds, because they are a form of authentic assessment, which focuses on the development of individual students instead of making comparisons among groups of students (Garcia & Pearson, 1994).

**Purpose 3: Assessment of the Learner**

Individual affective assessments help language arts teachers determine contributors and outcomes of students’ reading success (Afflerbach, 2007a) by assessing learner attitudes, motivations for reading, and interests. Such assessments are an integral part of helping language arts teachers determine how children see themselves as readers (or non-readers). The educational system has primarily focused on the assessment of learning paradigm, guided by the premise that teachers should use curriculum to guide instruction and then assess to determine whether students’ achieved proficiency in any part of the curriculum (Edwards et al., 2008). But a more current paradigm is needed to adapt to the changing climate of today’s classrooms, since students come to classrooms with varying proficiencies that are not always valued by our educational system, and those proficiencies have a tremendous impact on students’ literacy capabilities.

In order to reach students in diverse classrooms, language arts teachers must know their students in order to match students’ prior knowledge with the content and curricula to be taught. Since the goal of instruction is typically to bridge the gaps in knowledge that exist, teachers must know what their students do not know, which is why assessment for learning becomes relevant. Knowing the student is as important as knowing content and gaps in
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learning. Williams and Bauer (2006) advocate for affective accountability, and it can be achieved by assessing both cognitive and affective characteristics of students. In turn, language arts teachers “become accountable to students and adjust the curriculum accordingly” (Williams & Bauer, 2006, p. 20). Language arts teachers, who apply affective assessment to student writing, can better understand and connect to curriculum content and student personal traits, qualities, and interests.

Affective Assessments. Student’s reading abilities and achievement are just one aspect of reading development that can be measured. Affective attributes can offer tremendous insight into the children’s maturity as a reader (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Assessing the “self” is an important part of the assessment process, which includes a reader’s motivation, self-concepts, interests and attitudes (Afflerbach, 2007a; McKenna & Stahl, 2009). Afflerbach (2007a) contends that “successful student readers must be motivated, of positive attitude, of good self-concept, and capable of making accurate attributions for their performances” (p. 155). Among many ways to assess children’s self-efficacy, instruments like motivation surveys, self-concept scales, reading attitude surveys, reader interest surveys, checklists, and other affective instruments may be used.

Reading Assessments. A few such measures exist to assess the learner’s attributes toward reading and writing. Instruments like the Motivation to Read profile (Gambrell, Palmer, Colding, & Mazzoni, 1996), which is a 2-part assessment to evaluate students’ beliefs about themselves as a reader, help educators ascertain students’ interest in reading and their overall motivation to read. Another means of assessing students’ motivation to read is the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) that attempts to measure motivation specifically related to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational components and address students’ specific motivational tendencies such as self-efficacy, compliance, and grades.

Reader interest and reader attitude are important affective qualities that have important implications for teachers’ understandings of their learners. Language arts teachers often give students reading interest surveys that typically ask students about school reading interests, favorite kinds of books, reading habits, reading strategies, and special areas of interest. Two measures to assess children’s attitude toward literacy are the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) and the Writing Attitude Survey (Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000). In both surveys, elementary children are instructed to read statements about reading and writing and circle the cartoon picture of Garfield that best corresponds to how they feel about those statements. Literacy teachers in middle school and secondary classrooms may want to adapt these instruments to assess older students, or they may want to use the “intergenerational conversation” approach (Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999). Through intergenerational conversations, adolescent students complete a chart that describes the kinds of literate practices that they engage in on a daily basis (e.g., reading magazines, doing homework, computer use, phone, television/movies) and talk about what those literate practices mean to them. Although Bean used intergenerational conversations to learn more about his daughters’ literate practices, we believe that this approach has great potential for language arts teachers because rather than making assumptions about culturally-diverse students and their out-of-school literacy practices (e.g., minority students don’t read outside of school), this tool can elicit first-hand information about students’ multi-literate lives.

Writing Assessments. Many language arts teachers face the pressures of incorporating on-demand writing assessments into their daily practices because of the looming pressures of state standardized tests. Although we are not arguing for less attention to be paid to on-demand writing or other commonly assessed genres of writing, we assert that those forms of writing do not typically allow teachers to learn about their students. Through journal writing, reflective writing, and reading response logs, language arts teachers can informally learn about students’ perceptions, backgrounds, interests, and identities (Davi, 2006). For example, a teacher could ask a student to “freewrite” on a relevant topic from a class text or to write a reader autobiography to communicate how he has been shaped as a reader.

Purpose 4: Assessment of the Learners’ Social Worlds

According to Edwards, Pleasants, and Franklin (1999), children live in multiple social worlds “which affect them and all aspects of their development” (p. xix). Perhaps the two most critical worlds are family and community. Families are the child’s first and most critical teachers, and parents, siblings, grandparents, and even extended family members (e.g., aunts, uncles) can provide language arts teachers with useful information about students’ literacy strengths and needs (Edwards et al., 2008). When language arts teachers think of home literacy practices, they tend to think of traditional “mainstream” activities, such as helping with homework, parent-child bookreading, and actively participating in home-school events such as parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school night, and volunteering in classrooms (Edwards & Turner, 2010). Additionally, Anderson and Stokes (1984) identify nine domains of literate practices in the homes of culturally-diverse children that are often overlooked by teachers and schools: (a) daily living including tasks such as making shopping lists and paying bills; (b) entertainment, such as reading the TV guide or rules to a board game; (c) school-related activity; (d) religion, including reading religious texts and attending services; (e) general information, including miscellaneous literate activities; (f) work; (g) literacy techniques and skills, including those initiated by the child (e.g., coloring) and those initiated by the adult; (h) interpersonal communication, including writing...
letters or notes to family and friends; and (i) storybook time. Although several of these domains directly connect with mainstream home literacy practices, Anderson and Stokes argue that the other nontraditional domains also significantly contribute to the literacy development of culturally-diverse students. As a result, language arts teachers and schools who use purposeful assessments that illuminate students’ social worlds can learn more about the home literacy practices related to these nine domains by positioning parents as the “more knowledgeable others” (Vygotsky, 1978) in the relationship with teachers and schools.

Furthermore, when language arts teachers gather data from students’ families and communities, the purpose is not to assess their literacies in a judgmental or evaluative way (e.g., one family is less literate than another), but rather to inform. More specifically, language arts teachers should gather this information to gain new insights about the literacy practices and cultural discourses in the family and community, and to learn more about how these familial and cultural influences have shaped students’ literacy development (Edwards et al., 1999). In so doing, language arts teachers can move beyond a deficit perspective, and use a “funds of knowledge” perspective (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) to identify and interpret the wealth of resources within culturally-diverse families and communities.

**Family Assessments**

**Parent Stories.** Listening is a powerful form of assessment, but educators generally talk to parents rather than talking with them (Edwards et al., 1999). A critical tool that helps teachers learn to listen to parents is parent/ family stories. Parent stories are “narratives gained from open-ended conversations and/or interviews between teachers and parents” (Edwards & Turner, 2010, p. 141). Eliciting parent stories through questionnaires (Edwards et al., 1999) and family interviews (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2004) invites caregivers to share specific information about children’s ways of learning and communicating, the family’s routines and schedules, the interaction and relationships between parents and students, the family’s perceptions about schooling, and their expectations, hopes, and dreams for their children. In contrast to traditional forms of assessment that primarily gauge students’ development of school literacy, family stories serve as a critical tool for gathering information about students’ out-of-school literacies by offering insight into the literacy practices situated within their homes and communities. Parent stories are a powerful tool for K–12 schools because “by using stories as a way to express the nature of the home environment, parents can select anecdotes and personal observations….to give teachers access to complicated social, emotional, and educational issues…that unravel the mystery of students’ early literacy beginnings” (Edwards et al., 1999, p. viii). Teachers can then use the personal data derived from the parent stories to make classroom literacy instruction more congruent with their cultural knowledge and background (Edwards & Turner, 2010).

**Parent Journals.** Parent journals can also serve as a means of authentic assessment into students’ home literacy lives. Shockley (1994) initiated communication with the families of her first-grade students by inviting them to write about their children and their home lives in dialogic journals. Through this writing, Shockley exchanged pertinent information with parents about their children’s reading and writing skills, and learned more about the beliefs, expectations, and insights that parents had about their children. Similarly, Lazar and Weissburg (1996) asked parents enrolled in a college-reading program to write journal entries about their children and to share the journals with their children’s teachers. They concluded that the journals were effective in enhancing home-school connections because the parents’ entries revealed the students “purposeful use of print within the context of family life” (p. 228), and teachers were able to use this information to support the literacy development of their students both at school and at home.

**Home-Community Assessments**

**Community Literacy Walks and Photo Journals.** Afterbach (1996) noted that “a critical contribution to…assessment…can be made by students themselves. Students’ self-assessments often are an underutilized resource in reading assessment” (p. 202). Researchers have uncovered several methods for students to “read and write” their own cultural worlds through community literacy walks and photo journals. Community literacy walks are planned outings when teachers and students walk through the local neighborhood surrounding their school (Cancienne, 2009). As Orellana and Hernandez (1999) demonstrated in their classic study, children as young as first grade are aware of the environmental print in their communities, and have the capacity to make meaning of this print. Orellana and Hernandez walked with a group of 15 students in their urban community, taking pictures of local shops, visiting a Salvadorean market and a Guatemalan bakery, talking about the languages on the signs (e.g., a shop sign written in English, Korean, and Spanish) and critically discussing the print that held special value to them (e.g., street signs, graffiti, movie posters in a video store). After the literacy walk, Orellana and Hernandez encouraged the students to draw pictures and dictate stories about their experience, noting that several children who were reluctant to speak and write in class were highly engaged in these activities. Similarly, the teachers in a study conducted by Allen and her colleagues (2002) noted high levels of participation when they gave students cameras and encouraged them to take pictures of their homes, families, and communities and create photo journals. Both community literacy walks and photo journals are compelling assessment tools because (a) they provide an opportunity for language arts teachers to explore children’s literate worlds and learn about the community at the same time; (b) they provide opportunities for students to critically read, interpret, write, and talk about their social worlds; and (c) these tools could easily be adapted for students in middle school and high school classrooms.
Conclusion

Amidst concerns about the low levels of literacy achievement amongst culturally-diverse students, questions abound about the “best” ways to assess their language arts development. In this chapter, we argue that the answer depends upon the purposes of that assessment. Assessment of learning provides teachers with evidence of the learning that occurred over a period of time; whereas assessment for learning enables teachers to use relevant student assessment data to revisit gaps in instructional content. By assessing the learner and the learner’s social world teachers are better equipped to understand the rich, and sometimes undervalued, knowledge that students bring with them to school so they make appropriate instructional decisions that support students’ literacy learning.

Based upon our belief that “assessment must serve students” (Farr, 1991, p. 95), we contend that purposeful assessment programs enable language arts teachers to gather student data, and use it to make instructional decisions, in light of four different purposes. First, purposeful assessments give language arts teachers a synopsis of students’ learning through summative and formative (e.g., portfolios, performance-based assessments) measures. Second, purposeful assessments, including dynamic assessments, rating scales, and checklists, offer invaluable data to language arts teachers about students’ ongoing learning, as it occurs within the classroom. Next, purposeful assessments help language arts teachers to gain a deeper sense of their students as readers, and to consider how personal traits and interests shape language arts development. Finally, purposeful language arts assessments that are rooted within a cultural ecological orientation towards assessment build upon students’ experiences and values their social worlds, and should be embraced in culturally-diverse classrooms. By tapping into familial and community resources, language arts teachers can begin to understand how cultural characteristics, language, literacy environments, home-school connections, and other cultural resources play a part in students’ literate worlds.

References


Assessing Every Child


