

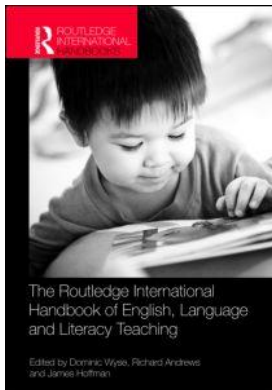
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Classroom assessment of literacy

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Classroom assessment of literacy involves teachers and students in the process of gathering, analysing and using assessment information. From this information, inferences about students' literacy development, achievement, and related instruction can be generated. Classroom assessment uses both formative and summative information, to assist, gauge, and then to certify learning. Classroom assessment is marked by shared responsibility of teachers and students, and it is demanding of their time, attention and knowledge.

Characteristics of effective assessment

Pellegrino *et al.* (2001) propose that effective assessment has, at its core, three features: a detailed description of the thing to be assessed (in this case literacy, or some aspect of literacy); a set of assessment materials that are developed in relation to the description (to establish construct validity); and the process of generating suitable inferences from the information that the assessment yields. In the case of literacy, things to be assessed may include decoding, spelling, inferential comprehension, persuasive essay writing, and using multimedia to construct a classroom presentation. Assessment materials and procedures are developed in accordance with our understanding of the particular aspects of literacy to be measured and with good classroom assessment practice. Inference represents the reasoning and judgments that are made about students, based on the assessment information. For example a teacher can infer student need from classroom assessment, tailoring instruction to meet the need.

Assessment that is sensitive to the developmental nature of literacy knowledge and the sociocultural aspects of classroom literacy learning can contribute to students' growth toward future achievements (Alexander, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, evolving assessment theory explains the importance of consequential validity, or the consequences that assessment has for teachers and students. Questions (e.g., Does the assessment help or hinder student progress? Does the assessment help optimize instruction? Do assessment results contribute to, or work against, positive student self-esteem

emanate from consideration?) of consequences? Further, the reliability of classroom assessment, reflecting consistency and trustworthiness of assessment across students and situations, demands teacher expertise. Advances in our understanding of effective assessment from both psychometric (Messick, 1989) and pedagogic (Black and Wiliam, 1998) traditions can help classroom assessments meet high standards for measurement and high standards for usefulness.

Classroom literacy assessment, then, should provide good measure of students' literacy learning. This learning may be around constrained skills and strategies, including phonics, or it may consist of reading and writing to perform diverse tasks, developing epistemic knowledge, and conducting self-assessment of learning. In each case, the complexity of the phenomena to be assessed must be honoured by the assessments we use. Most educational assessments sample quite narrow bands of growth and performance in this case, literacy development (Davis, 1998). Changing classroom literacy assessment must be accompanied by vision and effort related to changing classroom literacy itself. More is known about literacy and literacy assessment than is reflected in most classroom practice – much more. There are distinct disjunctures between the complexity and richness of literacy that exists outside of classrooms and how literacy is experienced within classrooms. As well, there is often a divide between best practices in assessment, and how literacy assessment is conducted in classrooms.

Evidence for the importance of classroom assessment of literacy

Assessment involves the process of obtaining samples of student work from which inferences can be generated about student achievement and need. Classroom literacy assessment has a traditional role of informing instruction and tracking student development and progress. However, classroom assessment also figures in theories related to the reflective practioner (Schon, 1990); zones of proximal development and teachable moments (Vygotsky, 1978); and student participation in the culture of assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998). First, Schon's (1990) reflective practitioner includes the teacher who seeks information about the goodness of fit between students and instruction. At the core of reflective practice is information, relevant and reliable, linked to teachers' decision making. Classroom literacy assessment provides information that features in decisions related to the suitability of the curriculum–student matches, and the need to move ahead with a lesson or refocus on a particular aspect of learning. Second, 'fresh' assessment information about the state of student learning and suitability of instruction fits well with Vygotsky's notion of zones of proximal development (1978). Effective instruction takes place within these zones, which are bounded by understanding of a student's current level of achievement and capability, and the next expected growth and achievement. The process of effective teaching, then, requires that a teacher can regularly and effectively identify the zones of proximal development with information that is detailed enough to inform instruction. This information must be precise, accurate and current – all goals of classroom assessment.

Third, assessment should provide students with knowledge about why assessment is important and how it works. When classroom assessment is explained, and its uses modelled, it encourages students to become active participants who learn, through apprenticeship, the ways and means of assessment (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Engagement with classroom assessment culture provides a means for teachers to introduce students

into the culture, and for students to become familiar with (and then adept at) ‘doing’ assessment on their own. From this view, classroom assessment helps shape a critical stance towards one’s work and provides models of the strategies that students need to learn to do assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

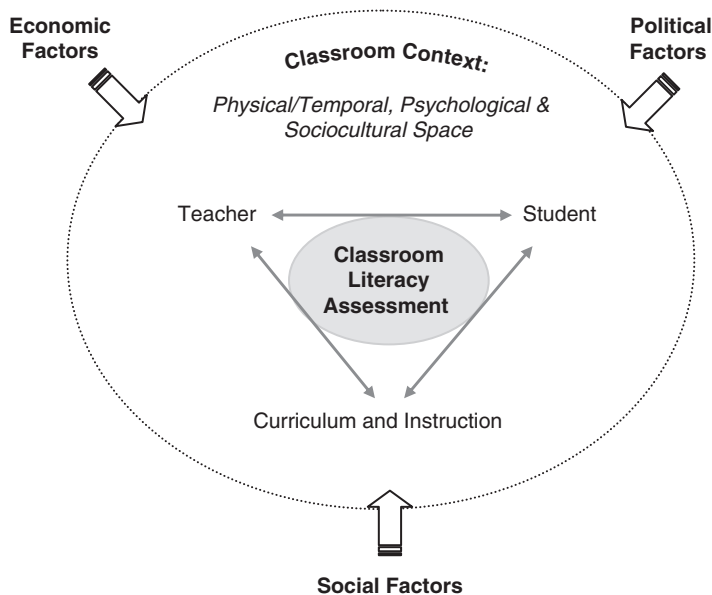
Influences on classroom literacy and literacy assessment

Our theoretical understandings of literacy and assessment are detailed and continually evolving. However, examination of classroom literacy and its assessment often reveals diminished notions of both. Given the ‘thinness’ of literacy and assessment in many classrooms, it is important to acknowledge the factors that contribute to this status quo. Schools are influenced by economic, political, and social factors that shape the classroom literacy that students experience. Figure 34.1 illustrates the situated nature of classroom literacy assessment, and the influences on literacy and how it is assessed.

For example, politics is centrally involved in the shaping educational standards, which in turn shape curriculum and instruction in the classroom. There is no clearer example of politics influencing literacy than the No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States, which is accompanied by specific instruction and testing mandates that shape literacy in the classroom. Economic factors also influence literacy in classrooms. School funding directly influences teacher–student ratios, class size, educational materials and experiences, and teachers’ professional development. As funding is limited, each expenditure reduces funds for other aspects of schooling. Monies spent on test preparation are monies not spent on enhancing the collection and use of classroom literacy assessment. Finally, social factors influence literacy in the classroom. The values and power of particular members of school communities (or outside school communities) can lead to narrow or expanded notion of classroom literacy. Entrenched habits of conceptualizing, teaching and assessing literacy may nurture or stifle innovation.

A further set of factors presents in classrooms – factors that we conceptualize as psychological, sociocultural and temporal/physical spaces. Psychological space represents the sum of cognitive and affective factors that present in a particular classroom. It includes the particular literacy learning goals, the expectations placed on students, the emotional climate of the classroom and the skills and strategies that are taught and learned. Sociocultural space includes the nature of the connection between students’ lives and language in and out of the classroom, the roles that students and teachers play in classroom literacy, and the spoken and written discourse patterns that exist in the classroom.

Finally, the temporal/physical spaces within classrooms act to constrain or encourage student literacy. Physical space includes the actual classroom set-up: seating configurations, individual student and collaborative work areas, computer terminals, hardware and software, and libraries. Temporal factors include the amount of time planned and realized for literacy activities in the classroom. A curriculum constructed around discrete, 50 minute blocks of time will be different from one that is oriented towards literacy projects conducted across an entire marking period. Thus, a set of factors influences literacy and literacy assessment in the classroom, often restricting school literacy. The factors help explain the disjuncture between current understandings of literacy and assessment, and what students encounter in classrooms.



Physical/Temporal Space	Psychological Space	Sociocultural Space
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher–student ratio • The configuration of desks, workspace and communal or single areas • The number and variety of books • Multimedia and internet hardware and software • Time allotted to teaching and assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused skills, strategies, and attitudes by curricula • Students’ agency and volition • Students’ epistemologies • Student and teacher affect, including self-esteem, self-concept and motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourse pattern • Nature of the relationships between teacher and student • Students’ funds of knowledge from outside classroom

Figure 34.1 Influences on classroom literacy and classroom literacy assessment.

Effective classroom assessment

The gulf between current and possible classroom literacy assessment practice is surmountable, and this section focuses on the characteristics of effective assessment. We use examples from literacy assessment research when available. Given that the research literature on classroom literacy assessment is not fully developed, we borrow from other areas of educational assessment (e.g. science assessment, history assessment) when necessary. We also cite work from affiliated fields, such as educational psychology and sociology, when we believe that it can inform effective assessment practice. Central to our idea of effective classroom assessment of literacy is the idea of teachers as assessment experts (Johnston, 1987). These teachers are accomplished at classroom

assessment and they understand the factors outside of school and within the classroom that influence literacy instruction, achievement and assessment. Neither the centrality of the teacher, nor the need for supporting teachers' professional development as assessment experts should be underestimated.

To illustrate effective classroom assessment, we situate our discussion in a school district that is undergoing transformation in how literacy and literacy assessment are conceptualized and experienced. Previously, the district addressed high stakes accountability with an exclusive focus on raising students' scores on standardized tests. Top-down pressure from state and school district levels minimized teacher participation in the selection of curriculum or assessment (e.g., Stephens *et al.*, 1995), and school district administrators expected teachers to follow a literacy curriculum that was purchased with the intent to raise test scores. The curriculum offered limited representations of literacy: literacy strategies and skills were introduced, taught, and learned in service of narrowly conceptualized academic tasks and achievement. The reading and writing curriculum focused on students' skill and strategy learning, the memorization of factual knowledge, and students giving this information back in test-like situations.

One goal for the district is summative testing augmented with ongoing professional development that focuses on formative assessment and its role in teaching and learning (Hoffman *et al.*, 1996; Valencia & Au, 1997). The district is supportive of initiatives that join formative assessment and summative assessments in a constructive manner, and provides school resources to support teachers in this effort. Professional development focuses on classroom assessment routines, including teacher questioning, portfolio assessment and performance assessment. Teachers are expected to collaborate with their colleagues to determine the most prominent assessment challenges and to develop action plans to meet the challenges. The teachers are united in their focus on classroom assessments that inform understanding of individual students and instruction of those students. They believe that while accountability is measured with a single test on a single day, accountability is achieved through careful teaching, informed by daily, formative assessments. In this context, teachers focus on the formative assessment of students' literacy, which they believe is central both to fostering literacy development and to raising the achievement levels of their students.

Based on the research literature related to literacy development and assessment, and effective schools, the teachers in this district identify characteristics of successful classroom literacy assessment that include: (1) formative and summative purposes of assessment; (2) transparency of assessment with student and teacher reflection; (3) the ability to demonstrate and communicate accountability; (4) allowing for situated interpretations of student literacy; (5) integrative and flexible usefulness; and (6) validity and reliability. In the following section, we describe each of these characteristics in relation to specific types of assessment, the focus of the assessment and the manner in which it supports particular literacy learning within the particular spaces of the classroom.

Classroom assessment that serves formative and summative purposes

A first characteristic of effective literacy assessment is the systematic approach to using both formative and summative assessments. Teachers and schools feel the pressure to demonstrate accountability, which is accomplished with test scores. However,

teachers understand that summative measures such as test scores are closely linked to formative measures: teaching and learning that are held to an accountability standard are enhanced by regular, formative assessment across the school year (Afflerbach, 2007).

Teacher questioning serves well both formative and summative assessment purposes. As students progress through lessons, teachers regularly use questions to check on learning (e.g. Can you find evidence provided by the author to support her claim?); to prompt student thinking (e.g. Do you understand this paragraph?); and to model questions that are valuable for students to ask (e.g. Have I set a reasonable goal for my reading?). Each of these types of question serves the formative purpose: to gather ongoing, instructionally useful information, in this case related to the cognitive skills and strategies students are learning, to help shape the manner in which students ask questions of the things they read, and to model questions that are central to students' self-assessment routines. Regular attention to formative assessment anticipates students' performance on summative assessments – students' test scores are traceable back to the series of classroom assessments that provided feedback and helped shape instruction. Teacher questions help transform the psychological space of the classroom because they promote student thinking related to both course content and assessment process.

Transparency and reflection with assessment

Students' movement towards independence is encouraged as assessment is made transparent and as students are engaged in assessment practice. Students who understand the ways and means (and value) of assessment, as opposed to 'taking assessment', or 'being tested or quizzed', are informed participants in assessment culture (Afflerbach, 2002). Reading and writing with self-assessment are examples of metacognition and self-regulation (Baker & Brown, 1984; Flavell, 1976). Teachers use assessments that encourage student reflection and that provide opportunities for modelling and discussing reflection with students. High quality teaching guides students from their current levels of learning towards their expected, future achievement (Vygotsky, 1978). In this zone of proximal development, teachers use assessment information reflectively to identify teachable moments and perform instructional decision making. The accurate identification of students' zones of proximal development is dependent on ongoing and detailed formative assessment. As teachers use formative assessment to inform their daily instruction, the teachers' spoken feedback fosters students' self-assessment (Crooks, 1988), and student reflection evolves from the classroom assessment models provided by the teacher (Sadler, 1989).

Through continual engagement in this supportive space, teachers and students transform a series of classroom assessment routines into their own self-assessment actions (Afflerbach, 2002). For example teachers model and think aloud as they ask questions in science and social studies classes, explaining to students why they are seeking particular information and how their questions relate to the goals of the lesson (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The teachers also provide explanation as to how they are evaluating the content of student responses. To support student self-assessment, the sociocultural space in the classroom is marked by frequent teacher–student interaction, contributing to the psychological space in which students are expected to assume responsibilities for conducting their own assessment.

Communicability and accountability of classroom literacy assessment

Does an assessment offer interested audiences valuable information that is readily understood? What is the relative descriptive power of a single test score, or a detailed narrative of student development? If a school community places high trust in teachers, the means for demonstrating accountability may vary. For example teachers earn the support of parents because they are able to describe the literate behaviours and accomplishments of their students in a narrative form (Afflerbach and Johnston, 1993). Another community may require that accountability be demonstrated by percentile rankings on standardized tests, or may be required to value test scores because of political pressure. This creates considerable difficulty for advocating and using classroom assessments because there is tension around which assessments are valued and used.

Teachers who are assessment experts consider the communicative value of assessments, in addition to more traditional criteria of validity and reliability (Shepard and Bliem, 1995). Teachers in this district are adept at using students' portfolios to communicate to parents, administrators and students the progress that is made from one marking period to the next (Valencia and Calfee, 1991). Digital portfolios contain drafts that demonstrate student growth in expository and persuasive writing. In addition, the portfolio helps communicate progress to students and parents as students work through long-term learning projects that include personal research, problem-solving, and the development and refinement of written communication (Johnson *et al.*, 1998). As parents, administrators and the students themselves examine portfolios and learn about student accomplishments, in detail, accountability is apparent. The portfolio also accommodates student work from across entire marking periods. The lengthy time frame that surrounds portfolio use in the classroom enables teachers and students to accumulate evidence of growth in literacy, as well as help students develop a sense of agency in assessment.

Situated interpretation and classroom literacy assessment

Many literacy assessments are constructed with the goal of the objective measurement of student learning and achievement. 'Scientific' assessment in literacy requires the collection of samples of students' work in intentionally standardized contexts, as when students take reading tests (Joint Committee on Testing Practices, 2004). However, when assessment occurs in highly controlled contexts, the contexts may not reflect the culture of literacy and learning in the classroom. In contrast, features of interpretive inquiry can inform classroom assessments (Moss, 1992), as the situated nature of student literacy use is a lens for observing growth. This process can help teachers look 'for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 1998: 67). Researchers conducting interpretive inquiry use their knowledge of the research context in interpreting data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). When teachers gather literacy assessment information *in situ*, attention to the context of learning provides an appropriate lens for interpreting observed student behaviours. Assessment is situated in consideration of students' past accomplishments and challenges, future literacy experiences, impending instruction and learning. Assessment results are not necessarily geared to national or state level norms – assessment is conducted and interpreted in relation to the teacher's detailed knowledge of students and their accomplishments and challenges.

Consider teachers' use of interpretive strategies with students' literacy portfolios, as portfolio contents are in relation to teachers' in-depth knowledge of when, where, and

how student work is produced. Students' specific achievements, performances and outcomes are interpreted with knowledge of context – instructional goals, student needs, curriculum and teaching resulting in a needed personalization of assessment. Moss (1992) notes that these cumulative and contextualized narrative records provide an evidentiary trail with specific examples that illustrate students' developing literacy.

The contents of students' literacy portfolios are interpreted in the context of classroom settings, and in relation to long-term literacy learning goals. Student writing samples, including initial drafts, revisions, editing and search traces, are situated in relation to the students' assignments, and their own trajectories of progress. Assessment of student work in the portfolio is situated in relation to what has preceded new work, and this expands the temporal space in which assessment is conducted (LeMahieu *et al.*, 1995). The portfolio also contains records of students' peer group evaluative conferences, reflecting changes in the psychological and sociocultural spaces within the classroom.

Integration and flexibility of classroom literacy assessments

An array of assessments is vital to providing a comprehensive account of students' classroom literacy development, and teachers and students benefit from literacy assessments that provide coverage of important learning processes and goals (Wilson and Adams, 1996). When assessment includes portfolios, performance assessments, teacher questioning, observation checklists, and tests and quizzes, there is the opportunity to integrate the processes and products of assessment so that information is cross-referenced. For example, student responses to comprehension questions based on textbook content may be related to their ongoing work in a performance assessment. In effect, assessment information that converges helps raise the accuracy and confidence of the many inferences that teachers make about students' accomplishments and needs from assessment data. The array of literacy assessments reflects teachers' proactive attention to the physical and temporal spaces in which daily literacy events take place.

Consider how integrated and flexible assessment works in a science classroom. Students read about the methods of scientific inquiry and then use this understanding to examine and inventory a forest environment near their school. Around the procedures is a series of teacher questions, teacher observations, entries in learning journals and student checklists for following scientific procedure. Each of these assessments provides unique and complementary information about students' understandings of assigned readings related to forests and their application of the knowledge gained through reading. A single source of information describes students' literal comprehension of science text (teacher questions); another provides information about students' use of learned course content (journal entries) as they conduct inventories of forest flora and fauna. A third source, student checklists, both encourages and supports students as they learn to independently manage the complex task (student checklist). The integrated assessment results from careful, a priori consideration of learning goals and appropriate assessment, and represents the thoughtful development of a comprehensive assessment plan.

Validity and reliability in classroom literacy assessment

Attention to the previous characteristics of effective classroom literacy assessment must be accompanied by the demonstration that assessment is valid and reliable.

Construct validity is arguably the most important form of validity (Messick, 1989) – assessment must be clearly tied to a detailed and accurate conception of literacy. In many schools, construct validity is claimed for tests, but it is a constrained validity.

A literacy assessment that focuses on the determination that students have mastered sound-symbol correspondences and that they read at a particular fluency rate, or ably write a five-paragraph theme, can qualify as having construct validity. Yet, such validity derives from a ‘thin’ conceptualization of what literacy is (Davis, 1998). More broadly conceptualized, construct validity of classroom literacy assessment might include measures of how well students evaluate authors’ arguments, how they use what they have learned from reading in assessed performances, and how they learn to use self-assessment checklists. The validity is connected to the psychological, sociocultural and physical/temporal spaces of the classroom. The construct of literacy is complex, and the attainment of construct validity is due, in part, to assessment that honours the complexity of the construct.

A second form of validity is consequential validity (APA, 1999), which focuses on the use of results of tests – the consequences for schools, teachers and students when test results are used to make decisions. We believe that consequential validity is an appropriate consideration for all types of assessment and that it is too limiting to examine ‘consequence’ only with test scores. In effect, there are many possible consequences, positive and negative, of literacy assessment (Tittle, 2005). These include opportunity costs, where school funds are spent in a way that may prevent the use of alternative assessments that are better suited to the phenomena to be measured, and assessment practices that situate students as ‘outsiders’ to the culture of assessment. In contrast, literacy assessment that leads students to engaged participation evidences positive consequence.

Teachers who successfully use classroom assessments focus on different potential consequences of the assessment. When assessment routines provide fine-grained information about students’ levels of literacy attainment, it can be used to shape instruction. Consequences considered in reference to the different spaces of the classroom informs efforts to help students build positive self-concepts as readers, establish effective metacognitive routines when reading, conduct peer evaluations and work in extended time frames to assess their developing projects.

How can results of classroom assessment be regarded as reliable and fair, and used in predictable, constructive ways? Classroom assessment must be held to the expectation that it will be reliable in representing samples of students’ literate behaviours (Stiggins, 2001). As teachers conduct formative assessment of students’ literacy development, the goal is to gather information that leads to teachable moments and effective instruction. Here, the reliability standard is met when information is sought, obtained, interpreted, and used in a consistent and fair manner. For example, a teacher well-versed in conducting Running Records develops a routine for listening to students’ oral reading, recording miscues and using this information to regularly plan instruction.

Fairness of assessment is established as teachers conduct assessment with the intent to provide the best support for students’ literacy development. Teachers realize that subjectivity in assessment is a given, and that a key to reliability is to acknowledge that bias may be operating in their assessments. Thus, a focus of professional development in classroom assessment is the establishment of routines to continually check on how each teacher is interpreting student work. Teachers are also interested in the manner in which classroom literacy assessments can reliably provide the information needed to

regularly update their mental models of students and their achievements. Thus, reliability of assessment directly impacts teachers' decision-making processes.

Assessment as a transformative agent

Assessment often trails curriculum and instruction: the primary focus of literacy development in school is on what to teach and how to teach it. In these situations, assessment may be the final consideration in curriculum adoption or development, and it lacks the ability to inform work that is, by and large, complete. While curriculum and instruction may be designed around assessment, it may not be to good end, as when what is taught in classrooms mimics high stakes tests in content and form. However, assessment can help transform classroom practice in a positive manner, and the assessment-curriculum relationship can be conceptualized as dynamic and symbiotic. When assessment is designed as an integral part of curriculum, there is the opportunity to tailor the fit between assessment and instruction. Popham (1997) claims that high-quality assessment helps teachers and students, because the assessment continually draws attention to important aspects of teaching and learning. For example, science and history assessments that ask students to demonstrate their learning through a performance (as opposed to giving back memorized information in a testing situation) help us conceptualize classroom literacy, and related science and history curriculum, differently. A curriculum designed to engage students in learning will necessarily focus on affective aspects of learning, and attention to assessment that helps us understand students' affective states will be useful. At best, literacy curriculum and assessment are engaged in dialogue that helps determine how best to teach and assess.

Conclusion

Effective literacy assessment is conceptualized in relation to the complexities of classrooms and schools, and conducted with psychometrically sound materials and procedures. The development of effective classroom assessments of literacy is daunting, because we must fully realize the nature of literacy in students' daily lives, and create appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment that honours this literacy. Teachers must occupy centre stage in classroom assessment, and school resources must be available to support the challenging work of helping teachers become classroom assessment experts. The results of efforts to optimize classroom assessment will include innovative assessments used in conjunction with challenging curriculum. This represents a sea change in terms of present-day assessments nominally measuring limited representations of student literacy.

Successful teaching and learning require the steady flow of information that a well-functioning assessment programme provides. The need for classroom assessment to supply the critical formative feedback for teachers and students is self-evident, as we hope is the idea that summative assessment products (i.e. high stakes test scores) will improve as does formative assessment practice. Students do not come to school well prepared on testing day because of summative assessments, but because their teachers regularly use classroom literacy assessments and their attendant information to develop and deliver appropriate instruction.

In classrooms, myriad factors predetermine curriculum – curriculum that is wedded to restricted representations of literacy, and what students must know and do to be ‘literate’. It is schools’ duty to support students within varied literate environments – environments that reflect the evolving nature of literacy and that encourage students to participate. As this occurs, literacy assessment must undergo a parallel evolution. Thin measures of thin representations of literacy do little good. Classroom assessments must focus on important teaching and learning and they must provide fine-grained information that contributes to the accurate portrayal of student growth and performance. From this, we make appropriate inferences about what students can do, what they may next achieve, and how we can best support their growth.

Literacy assessment is effective when it is used with full understanding of the contextual influences on assessment. Time and space constraints on classroom assessments, including student–teacher ratios that discourage individualized work, will impede good intention and innovative assessment. Psychological constraints, such as a hyper-focus on hierarchical skills instruction and acquisition, restrict assessments to report only on students’ performances and growth in relation to the diminished ideas of literacy and learning. Sociocultural constraints in classrooms influence the measurement of individual student growth. Individual seatwork should not be assessed to the exclusion of describing growth and achievement in students’ collaborative problem-solving.

The movement towards excellence in classroom assessments of literacy is fuelled by both trust and teaching expertise. It is the exceptional teacher who is capable of using classroom assessment routines that are reliable and valid, that encourage student self-assessment, that are transparent, and that offer multiple perspectives on student performance. It is the exceptional school community that is supportive of teachers’ movement towards expertise in classroom assessment, and that provides ongoing resources for developing this expertise.

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