

Assessing and Evaluating Student Learning

Introduction

Assessment is the process of gathering information on student learning.

Evaluation is the process of analysing, reflecting upon, and summarising assessment information, and making judgements and/or decisions based on the information collected.

Reporting involves communicating the summary and interpretation of information about student learning to various audiences who require it.

“Assessment and evaluation are essential components of teaching and learning in English language arts. Without an effective evaluation program it is impossible to know whether students have learned, whether teaching has been effective, or how best to address student learning needs. The quality of the assessment and evaluation in the educational process has a profound and well-established link to student performance. Research consistently shows that regular monitoring and feedback are essential to improving student learning. What is assessed and evaluated, how it is assessed and evaluated, and how results are communicated results send clear messages to students and others about what is really valued—what is worth learning, how it should be learned, what elements of quality are most important, and how well students are expected to perform.”

Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum

Although the terms assessment and evaluation are often used interchangeably, in actuality they are two parts of the same process. Assessment is the process of gathering evidence of what the child can do. Evaluation is the process that follows this collection of data, including analysis and reflection, as well as decisions based on the data.

The ***Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum*** provides a comprehensive overview of assessment techniques pertinent to English language arts. Teachers are encouraged to read the section entitled *Assessing and Evaluating Student Learning*, pages 46–53.

Basic Principles of Assessment/Evaluation

- The primary purpose of assessment and evaluation is to inform teaching and to promote and encourage learning—to promote optimal individual growth. In order to provide information vital to the teachers, assessment and evaluation must be an ongoing and integral part of the teaching/learning process. It is one continuous cycle consisting of collecting data, interpreting data, reporting information, and making application to teaching.
- Assessment and evaluation must be consistent with beliefs about curriculum and classroom practices, and clearly reflect the various outcomes of the Kindergarten–3 English language arts curriculum, including those areas that can not easily be assessed with pencil and paper (e.g., processes, attitudes, and values).
- The assessment/evaluation process involves the use of multiple sources of information collected in a variety of contexts. In order to make decisions about any aspect of a child’s learning, the teacher observes evidence of that learning at different times, in different contexts, and in different ways. No one single behaviour, strategy,

activity, or test can provide a comprehensive picture of a child's learning.

- The assessment/evaluation process recognizes learners as active partners in their own learning and in the evaluation of that learning. Students are encouraged to reflect on their own growth, considering progress, strengths and weaknesses, and goals.

Assessment and Evaluation: A Decision-Making Process

As teachers engage in the process of assessment and evaluation, they make a number of decisions based on their knowledge of students and how they learn, as well as the goals and expectations of the Kindergarten–3 English language arts curriculum. This includes decisions such as the following:

- Which students will be assessed and why?
- What will be the focus of assessment?
- What assessment strategies will be used? In what contexts?
- How will the information be recorded?
- On the basis of the evidence collected, what patterns emerge? What is the significant evidence? What does this tell me about the child's learning?
- What is the best way to report this information? Who needs to hear it?
- How will I use this information to inform my teaching?

Strategies for Collecting Data

The assessment/evaluation process involves the use of multiple sources of information collected in a variety of contexts. At the primary level, many teachers use observation, work samples, and self-evaluation as tools in the process of assessment and evaluation.

Observation

Observation is the careful consideration and analysis of students' behaviour and performance based on a broad range of contexts. In the Kindergarten–3 English language arts curriculum, observation is the most important assessment tool teachers use. In order to use observation effectively, teachers need to know a lot about students, language, and how students learn language, and they need to be able to interpret what they are observing.

Students demonstrate what they think, know, and can do as they engage in various classroom activities that require the application of language processes and learning strategies. Teachers can learn a great deal about students by observing them engaged in such processes as reading, writing, and interacting with others.

Teachers who have not been accustomed to using observation as an assessment tool are sometimes uncertain about what they should be looking for. The key-stage and specific curriculum outcomes provide a framework for teachers to use in their observations. They should be looking for information in a variety of areas, including the following:

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Attitudes</i> | Does the child approach language tasks with enthusiasm and confidence? Is the child more hesitant about some language tasks than others (e.g., speaking in front of a large group)? |
| <i>Strategies</i> | To what extent does the child <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrate the various cueing systems to predict, monitor, and self-correct/confirm? • use a variety of strategies to construct meaning? have strategies for generating ideas for writing? • have strategies for revising? • have strategies for spelling unknown words or for editing for spelling? |
| <i>Attention to Task / Independence</i> | Is the child able to attend to a task for a reasonable amount of time? To what extent can he/she work independently? |
| <i>Interaction</i> | Does the child share ideas, opinions, and feelings? Does he/she make use of the input of others? |
| <i>Concepts/Understandings</i> | Does the child understand such concepts as directionality, reading as a meaning making process, story structure? |

Gathering Observational Data

Observations need to be both formal and informal

Planned (Formal) Observations

To make classroom observation manageable and effective, teachers need to focus their observations. Many teachers develop a systematic, rotational schedule. For example, they might decide to observe carefully one to three students per day in a variety of contexts (shared reading, independent and guided reading, writing conferences). As well, they might choose a particular focus for their observations in each of these contexts as they work through their class. For example, as a grade 1 teacher observes students during one cycle of collecting data in shared, guided, and independent reading, she chooses one-to-one matching and use of the cueing systems as the focus of her observations.

Unplanned (Informal) Observations

Important and relevant information can also be gathered more incidentally. For example, the unplanned observation of Melissa in the following vignette yields some rich information.

Ms. D. had been teaching students about suspense through mini-lessons, and they had been discussing suspense in the book explored in shared reading. The next day as Ms. D. was reading aloud to the class, Melissa (a child who experiences difficulties with many aspects of language) raised her hand. Bursting with excitement, she exclaimed, “There it is! That’s it!”

Ms. D., somewhat surprised and puzzled, asked “What do you mean, Melissa?”

“That’s where the author is making suspense!” Melissa exclaimed triumphantly.

Observations Made in the Contexts of Conferences/ Interviews

Teachers can also gather important data about students’ attitudes, understandings, and knowledge through questioning students and talking with them. Although students may know or be able to do more than they put into words, conferences and other forms of dialogue can provide a wealth of information about students and their learning. Conferences and interviews are also effective in that they provide students with feedback, critical in helping learners grow. Conferences provide an effective way to gather data about areas such as

- reading processes and strategies
- goals for future work
- attitudes
- willingness to take risks
- writing processes and strategies
- work and study habits
- understanding of concepts
- interests

Some of the same information can be gathered through written questionnaires and surveys.

Recording/Organizing Observational Data

If observation is to be accepted by parents and other educators as a legitimate form of assessment, then teachers need to find ways of effectively recording data gathered in this way. When observational data is recorded, it can give concrete evidence of students' learning. Strategies for recording data include the following:

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records are short narrative descriptions of observations in the classroom. Teachers often use binders with a few pages devoted to each student. New pages can be added as needed. Some teachers write notes on post-it notes or index cards that are placed in the binder at the end of the day. This works best for incidental unplanned observations. For planned observations, many teachers often use a clipboard with a separate sheet for each child they will be observing on any given day (example 2). Others use forms containing the names of the whole class or student groups and spaces for the date of observation and comments (example 1).

Anecdotal comments should lead to interpretation and recognition of patterns of learning that emerge over time. Gathering, recording, and reflecting on anecdotal comments based on both systematic and incidental observations of students' learning and language processes yields rich information for making judgements and decisions.

Examples of two types of anecdotal records:

| Focus of Observation: Reading Strategies | | Context: Reading Conference |
|--|-----------|---|
| Name | Date | Observations |
| Janie | Jan 16/96 | points to words. unsure of some words. Crust - said scraps but self-corrected. Basket - said bet - didn't make sense but kept on going. |
| Melissa | Jan 16/96 | skips word if unknown but doesn't come back to try it again. Worked with her to try it again thinking about what would make sense. |
| David | Jan 16/96 | reads with expression. very few miscues. reads with confidence. using all reading systems. |
| Tony | Jan 16/96 | reads with expression and fluency. no difficulty with this selection. confident reader. |

| | |
|---------|---|
| Sept 21 | - The Circus (L-1) well done; exp; using pictures; matching one to one. 2 wds/pg. |
| Oct. 10 | - Sunrise (L-2) fluent; wks for get some self-correcting; liked pictures |
| Nov. 13 | - using letters in writing, initial consonants, no spacing |
| Nov 14 | (R.C.) L-5 Going Fishing (new) good attempt at using reading strategies (predicting - self-correcting (want-went) Thought book was easy. Knew lots about fishing. |
| Nov 19 | T. I's Tree (L-6) matching one-to-one. Reads with expression; self-correcting some substitutions - but they make sense e.g. said for asked |
| Nov 22 | - Writing a calendar book - knew "ing" |

Checklists

Checklists are another way to record data gathered through observation. Most teachers find that checklists can not replace anecdotal records. Some checklists, however, have a space for anecdotal comments opposite each item. Teachers find checklists useful as an organizational device to help focus their observations, and to clarify their own thinking about what behaviours are indicative of successful learning. When students are involved in helping to develop and use checklists, they can also be useful in assisting students in discovering what is valued and taking ownership of their own learning.

Checklists are most useful when they are designed or adapted by teachers around specific curriculum outcomes and the needs of their own classes. Because checklists need to be manageable to be useful, teachers should identify only important concepts, skills, and strategies when creating them.

Example of an Emergent Reading Checklist

Name:

Date:

| | Consistently | Sometimes | Not yet Obvious |
|---|--------------|-----------|-----------------|
| - Participates confidently in shared reading | | | |
| - Understands that print contains the message | | | |
| - Knows which way to go (directionally) | | | |
| - Can indicate a word | | | |
| - One-to-one matching | | | |
| - Recognizes some high frequency words both in and out of context | | | |
| - Uses initial consonant as a cue along with context when reading | | | |
| - Expects reading to make sense | | | |
| - Able to sit for a time and read | | | |
| - Can retell story | | | |

Running Records

A running record is a strategy to assess reading in which the teacher listens to the student read orally and records what the child says and does. The running record is then analyzed for patterns of reading behaviour.

The running record is an excellent way to assess the way in which students are processing print. By taking and analysing running records, teachers can determine the strategies and cueing systems students are using when they read as well as those with which they need some support.

Generally teachers in the primary grades take formal running records about three times during the year. They do not spend time on extensive analysis with those students who are growing steadily and processing print effectively for their stage of development. Other students will require an in-depth analysis, and more frequent informal checks.

Although teachers can observe and record behaviours when students are still largely relying on memory to read, running records are not usually used until they are attempting to work out the print.

Materials for Running Records

The text used for a running record should be at the student's approximate instructional level (one he/she is able to read at an accuracy rate of 90–94 percent). The text can either be one the student has not previously read, or one with which he/she is slightly familiar. For recording purposes, teachers can use a blank sheet, a copy of the text, or a running record form (Appendix 4, p. 282).

Procedure

The student is asked to read the text orally while the teacher tapes and/or records everything the student says and does. Correctly read words are recorded with a check mark, and variations from the text are recorded with conventions such as those that follow. Self-corrections and repetitions are not counted as errors.

Recording Conventions

| | | |
|------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Substitution | <u>father</u> fast | (Student) (Text) |
| Omissions | <u>—</u> the | |
| Insertions | <u>very</u> — | or very ^ |
| Self-Corrections | <u>father</u> SC faster | (counted as self-corrections rather than errors) |
| Repeats | <u>when</u> R | (not counted as errors) |
| Pauses | / | (not counted as errors) |

Analysing the Running Record

Teachers analyse the data they have recorded, looking for patterns in the cues the student makes use of, and the strategies he/she has in place. Calculating the student's accuracy rate can give information about the difficulty level of the text for the child. The analysis of the running record helps the teacher to determine a focus for teaching strategies for helping the student move forward.

Analysis of the running record consists of the following steps:

1. For each error, read the sentence up to the point of the error, asking what cues the student seemed to be using when he/she made the error:

 meaning cues (Semantic)
 knowledge of grammatical structure (Syntax)
 visual cues (Graphophonic)
2. For each self-correction, ask this same question about both the error and the self-correction.
3. Examine the whole running record to look for patterns with regard to cues the student uses predominantly (or does not tend to use).
4. Note strategies the student typically uses when he/she comes to an unknown word (e.g., seeks help, reads on, reruns, makes no attempt, sounds out).
5. Note strategies the student typically uses after making an error (e.g., asks for help, ignores, attempts to self-correct by reading on, reruns, sounds out, breaks into syllables).
6. Note the student's understanding of characters, setting, plot, and inferences from retelling and response to questions.
7. Synthesize the information and consider the focus of instruction and teaching strategies that would help the student move forward.

Example of a running record:

Work Samples

Students' products are another source of assessment data for teachers. Products such as drawings, pieces of writing, graphs, role-playing, and maps are representations of students' knowledge, understanding, skills, and strategies. **Combined with data gathered in other ways, cumulative dated samples of students' work can yield significant information about their development.**

Teachers often use the student portfolio as a way to keep and organize student work. Portfolios may include pieces of writing (both early drafts and final versions), drawings, journal and learning log samples, a variety of responses to reading, listening, and viewing experiences, responses to open-ended questions, explanations of the steps or processes used in performing language tasks, reading records, and a variety of ways to organize and record information such as notes, charts, and maps.

By comparing dated samples of the work of students to earlier samples, teachers can tell a great deal about their development. Teachers also often develop and use a set of criteria when considering students' work. For example, in considering students' oral or written retellings (which teachers often use in conjunction with running records and miscue analysis), teachers use criteria such as the following:

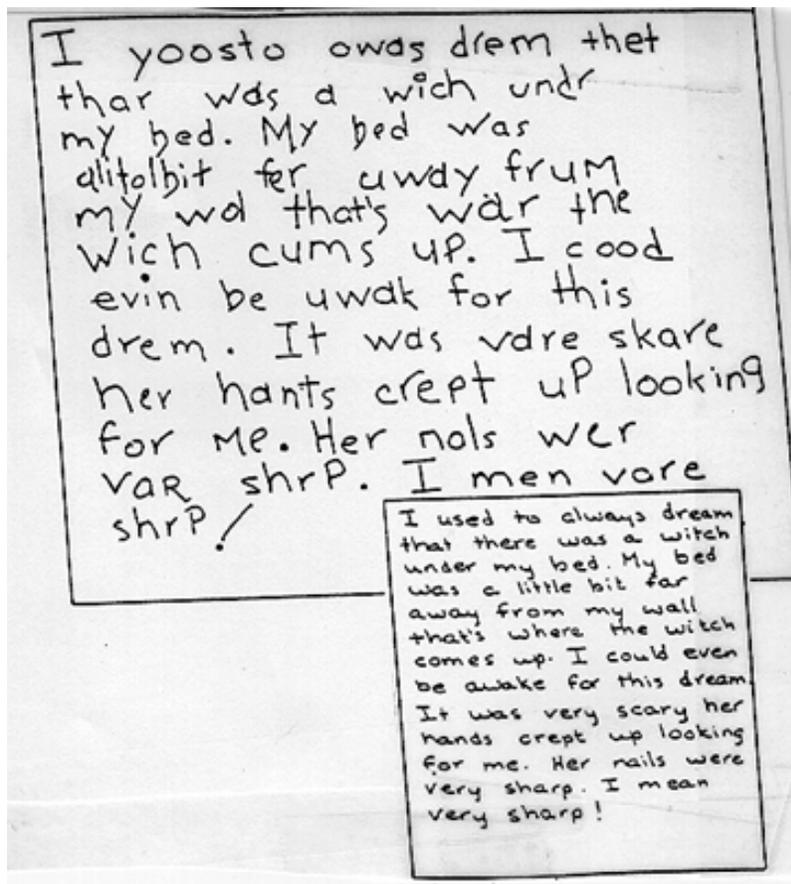
Does the child include

- an introduction
- setting (where, when)
- names of main characters
- names of other characters
- problem or goal
- story episodes
- solution to the problem

In considering the writing of students in the primary grades, teachers take into consideration criteria such as the following:

- **Does the text make sense? Do the ideas or events follow logically?**
- **Does the text have a beginning, middle and end? Is there sequence?**
- **Does the writer include enough detail, but not too much?**
- **Are appropriate language structures used?**
- **Is appropriate punctuation/capitalization used?**
- **Is the spelling at an appropriate level of development?**
- **Is the printing/handwriting legible?**
- **Do illustrations enhance the text?**

Example of a grade 1 writing sample with teacher analysis:



Mark (May 16)

- has an idea that he develops with detail
- effective use of vocabulary “her hands crept up”
- generally has control of capitals, lower-case letters, periods and exclamation marks
- spelling doesn't impede flow of ideas
- correct spelling of high frequency words increasing (my, was, the, up, for, her, this, it, looking)
- including most consonant sounds and generally including vowels
- will work with Mark on vowel patterns and editing for spelling
- very pleased with Mark's progress

(See also Appendix 5, pp. 303-306, for examples of student work showing writing development from kindergarten to grade 3 and criteria used to assess primary writing).

Self-Evaluation

When students are involved in reflecting on their own learning, they are empowered as learners. Reflection on their learning leads students to gain increasing control over their learning and language processes. Students in the primary grades can be involved both formally and informally in self-evaluation.

Informal self-evaluation consists of the ongoing reflection about learning that is a natural daily part of the curriculum (e.g., What did we learn? How did we solve the problem? What do I do when I come to a word I don't know? Did everyone keep on task in our group?) Teachers can encourage this kind of reflection in a variety of contexts, for example, reading and writing conferences, classroom discussions, literature circles, learning logs, shared reading, and shared writing.

One way to involve students in more formal self-evaluation is through the use of classroom portfolios. A portfolio is a collection of work selected by the student for assessment and evaluation purposes to reflect his/her best or representative work.

Teachers who use portfolios involve their students three or four times during the year in examining carefully their work in given areas (e.g., pieces of writing, responses to literature, learning log entries) and in making selections to place in their portfolios. The portfolio samples are accompanied by written reflection (sometimes dictated in the case of younger students) in which students explain why they have chosen each item, what it shows about what they are learning and can do, and what goals they have for future learning.

The process of comparing, selecting, and reflecting is a powerful learning experience for students. Through the process of reflecting on what and how they are learning, and their goals for future learning, students learn to take control of their own learning.

Example of grade 1 portfolio sample and reflection:



Foot

I might be going skating on Saturday. I'm a good skater. My skates are black and white. I can skate very very fast! It is fun!

I mit be going skating on Saturday. I am a good skatr. my skate are black and White. I can skate veare vare fast! It is fun!

~~I~~ can just see you whizzing along!

WREN D. TELLEMAN WREN D. TELLEMAN Jan 16, 1995

"I remembered all of the pencil work I think I put all of the capital in the right places. I sounded out all the words. It's my best. I really like skating. I did some of my best printing. My skates reminded me of one of the books I read at school The Magic Hockey Skates. My skates look like them."

Goal: "Put my letters straighter. Sometimes I get mixed up on all those lines. I will try to make my stories more interesting. Some more interesting things might happen when I go out and I might think of some interesting things that would make good stories."

Reporting the Information

Students' progress should be monitored continually and communicated to parents/caregivers at regular intervals. Reporting procedures need to be consistent with the philosophy and the learning outcomes of the curriculum. **Traditionally, numerical marks, letter grades, or letter symbols have been used to report student progress; however, it is difficult to convey development in language learning through such grading systems alone.**

Many teachers are exploring alternate ways of communicating student progress with students. One type of reporting favoured by many teachers consists of a combination of description and checklists. Instead of using categories like *satisfactory, good and very good*, some teachers find it more useful to use the categories *consistently, occasionally, and not yet obvious*.

Student progress reports should be based on the data teachers have compiled in multiple ways and from various contexts. As teachers write progress reports, they consider questions such as the following:

- What can the child do now that he/she could not do at the time of the last report?
- What has the child learned about the various language processes?
- What areas need attention in the next stage of the child's development? What are the future language and learning goals for the child?
- What can parents do at home to facilitate language development?

When presenting information about student progress, it is critical that the language used be meaningful for the intended audience.

Information sessions helping parents come to understand aspects of the Kindergarten–3 English language arts curriculum can give them a common language for talking about their child's progress.

When teachers meet with parents to discuss the child's progress, they often refer to the data they have collected in a number of ways from a variety of contexts, using it to support and explain their comments. Some teachers also involve students in the conference with parents/caregivers, especially if the students have been involved in self-evaluation. In such situations, students often use their portfolios to explain to parents/caregivers what they are learning and what goals they have for their future learning.

Making Applications to Teaching

An important part of the assessment/evaluation process is the adjustment teachers make to their teaching as a result of collecting and analysing data. If the primary purpose of the evaluation process is to promote optimal individual growth, **it is crucial that teachers use assessment data to inform their teaching.** For example, information gained from a running record can help teachers (and parents/caregivers) provide appropriate feedback to students when they read. Examination of students' writing products may lead to the teacher providing instruction in specific areas in the form of mini-lessons or conferences for individuals or small groups of students.

The assessment/evaluation process is not the end of the learning process, but one part of a continuous cycle.