

Developing a Rubric to Follow Change in Teacher Literacy Practice: Content Validity
and Substantive Focus

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The study of teaching effectiveness involves identifying the practices to test, controlling variables, and collecting baseline and outcome data. Because we are working with human factors, control of variables is difficult even in very small short term studies. Experimental conditions are required to meet the “gold standard” as defined by the federal government for literacy research (NICHD, 2000). These conditions presume that teaching can be delivered in a similar enough way that the true test is of the practice. In reality, strict control is very difficult to achieve and often distorts the very nature of instruction. We repeatedly implement “proven” techniques by placing them in the complex social context of classrooms, schools, and districts; and we are disappointed that they seem to make no difference. We need large-scale studies that provide good information about how techniques tested in small experiments are played out across large numbers of practitioners. And we need to assess teaching in a way that gives us information about the change process that takes place with the implementation of any new approach.

When educational practices are used by a large number of teachers in very different contexts, it becomes very difficult to understand the results. Teachers apply practices in individualistic ways depending on their assumptions about learning. They bring their own frames of meaning to the process of implementation, and in the process make subtle but pervasive changes. Time after time, researchers find that something “works” in one classroom but not in another; lower effects are sometimes explained as a lack of fidelity in implementation. What was possible in the highly controlled short term experiments could not be delivered with the same quality in a large-scale study.

One of the enemies of fidelity is time. There is a tension between the fact that it takes time for teachers to learn new practices and the fact that funding often requires that studies be conducted over short periods of time. When massive change is expected, the problem is even greater. Even four years of time is insufficient for a highly complex set of new practices to take root and be brought to excellence across all of the grades in a school. Administrators generally throw up their hands and purchase a new reading system (all which are continually revised, making it impossible to test them using the gold standard for research).

We began this four-year study by collecting baseline data on students and on teacher behavior. During the first year of the study, the literacy coordinator candidates participated in their own training without expectations for communicating new practices to teachers. The goal of this training was to give staff developers time to internalize new practices at a deeper level before being expected to teach them to others. This process is consistent with the idea that deeper understanding of theoretical underpinnings is key to implementing new practices effectively.

Literacy coordinators would continue to receive on-site support in the form of two visits from university trainers during year two while they simultaneously begin to teach the initial course to teachers in the school. This year-long course is designed to help teachers engage in a gradual change process. Thus, the first two years of data collection

actually represent baseline information. This plan gave us a way to capture change in instruction over time. To assess change, we created a multidimensional rubric that would be applied at periodic intervals throughout the study.

The rubric for this study is intentionally not “generic” in its orientation. It is embedded in an understanding of student development in reading and writing and a corresponding language and literacy instructional framework. The “comprehensive literacy approach” of the Literacy Collaborative integrates reading, writing, and word study in explicit response to what students already know and what they need to know as readers and writers (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001, 2006). In addition to discrete skill development, such instruction aims to help students learn the purposes of literacy and how written language “works.” Students at all levels engage in “learning by doing” though reading and writing in tandem with explicit teaching and guidance from the teacher. Although specific to the Literacy Collaborative, the rubric has applicability to other comprehensive or balanced literacy approaches.

Grounding Instruction in a View of Learning

Instruction in all of these contexts is based on a complex view of literacy.

Reading. Readers have acquired a processing system, which is *an integrated set of strategic actions by which readers extract and construct meaning from written language*. Readers are engaged in complex thinking that is largely transparent to them as a process. That is, we concentrate on ideas without conscious awareness of what is happening in the brain, which is simultaneously controlling every part of the body. Inside the human brain, processing or problem-solving is taking place. According to Clay, “Processing refers to getting access to and working with several different types of information to arrive at a decision.” (Clay, 2001, p. 80).

We cannot truly separate thinking into compartments. Before, during, and after reading, individuals constantly think:

- Within the text, noticing the important information and details and putting them together in a coherent way.
- Beyond the text, making their own connections and bringing prior knowledge to reading, and making hypotheses.
- About the text, noticing important aspects of the text such as language, organization, and writer’s craft.

All of these complex operations occur simultaneously as readers meet the demands of texts on the processing system. When we say that a text places demands on a reader, we are really asking: “What must the reader do in order to read this text with understanding?” The answers to that question help us realize what readers are required to do. No matter how simple the text is, the answer is always more than decoding the words.

Readers must draw on a wide range of information to successfully process a text. Some information is *visible*, that is, you can see it in the text. It includes all the symbols and art in the text. Some information is *invisible*; it exists in the reader’s brain. It includes knowledge of the world, content, texts, and language as well as all of the experience the reader brings to reading the text. Texts provide the opportunity and actually demand that readers “mix” visible and invisible information. The reader is constantly processing both kinds of information. The different kinds of information that

readers use are complex and wide-reaching. Within a processing system, visible and invisible information work together.

Writing. Young writers, too, are engaged in acquiring a very complex process. They are challenged to compose written language using syntax that is different from oral language. Oral language, which comes out in temporal sequence, must be represented with combinations of forms that are arranged in space on the page. Keeping a meaningful message in mind while constructing it letter by letter requires coordination of many different kinds of information--the particular sequence of words arranged in syntax to convey a message, the specific letters needed to form each word (as related in both simple and complex ways to the sounds of language), word parts, sometimes unrelated to sounds, that nevertheless appear as building blocks of words, and the directional movements needed to write the letters in order. Writers are orchestrating a large amount of information.

Reading and writing relationships. Processing a text involves a wide range of cognitive actions—all of the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects of engaging with a text. Processing refers to “all the activities happening in the learner’s head, brain, mind or neural networks.” (Clay, 2001, p. 124). The processing system utilizes all aspects of relevant knowledge—letter and word recognition, connections to language knowledge, accessing of content, personal, and text knowledge. All of this involves strategic action in the brain. When we refer to *thinking*, we mean the in-the-head consideration of the text; as an active process, thinking is just about the same as the term comprehending, but we like it better because it is more inclusive of the wide range of ways readers act on texts and is not so tied to testing and particular curricular approaches. Response is an important part of the act of processing and involves many ways of thinking.

Reading and writing are different but highly interrelated and complementary processes. When they are engaged in writing, children are also learning a great deal about how written language works. Conversely, when they engage in reading, they are encountering the syntactic patterns and the forms of written language. When they heard and discuss texts in interactive read aloud, children are gaining vocabulary and learning how texts are structured and organized, which adds to the resources they employ in reading and writing. Across instructional contexts, teachers can be very aware of these connections and actively and intentionally foster them.

Comprehensive Literacy

In brief, comprehensive literacy consists of several interrelated approaches, each of which has particular purposes and must be examined as an instructional context. Yet, these contexts are not separate components because effective instruction requires teaching for aspects of the reading and writing processes *across* contexts. Deeper processing, such as comprehending, is not learned in discrete lessons that direct children to practice a “strategy” as if it is one skill to be learned from one book. We use the metaphor of “echoes” to describe the way teachers use their knowledge of literacy processing to make instruction more powerful within each context. They constantly remind children of aspects of processing across the day and in connection with many texts that they read or write. This *teaching for strategies* is the key to helping children build effective systems for reading and writing and is a guiding principle for the model of

instruction that we sought to measure in this study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). We chose to examine teacher behavior across time in the following instructional contexts:

1. Interactive read aloud (usually whole class instruction). Teachers read aloud to students an array of texts that are carefully selected to help students think in various ways about texts. The teacher uses intentional conversation (conversational moves directed toward a goal of instruction) and also promotes routines such as “turn and talk” to help them learn how to talk with each other about texts. The opportunity to engage in “text talk” is rich (Beck & McKeown, 2001). The teacher is decoding the words of the text by reading aloud but in every other way, students are processing it and expanding their understanding through talk that is grounded in texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006)
2. Shared reading (whole class or small group instruction). In shared reading the teacher and children read from a common text that is either enlarged or on multiple copies. Usually the text is read several times. Group support helps students to process more difficult texts that they could independently, although it is still important to match the complexity of the text to the group. Using this familiar text, the teacher makes appropriate teaching points that extend children’s understanding of the reading process (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000).
3. Guided reading (small group instruction). Students are grouped because they are similar in their progress. The teacher selects a text that is appropriate for the group, introduces it in a way that will help students read it effectively, coaches individuals during reading, and invites students to discuss it afterwards. The teacher can also make some very specific teaching points directed toward any aspect of the reading process. Small group reading instruction assures that students learn to comprehend written texts (Person & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 1998) as well as learn to use phonics skills to take words apart while reading for meaning (Pressley, 1998; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Instruction is designed to teach comprehension and vocabulary while also providing explicit instruction in reading fluency (NICHD, 2001; Pinnell, et al., 1995).
4. Interactive writing (whole class or small group instruction). In this highly supportive context, children can fully participate in the writing process (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). The teacher and children collaboratively compose a text and then write it word by word on a large chart. At several carefully selected points in time, the teacher invites individual children to come up to the chart and make contributions by adding letters or words. These occasions have high instructional value in helping children learn the construction of words (phonics) as well as important aspects of the writing process.
5. Writing workshop (whole class and individual). The teacher provides a minilesson on any aspect of writing; then students write independently, conferring with the teacher; and finally, there is a brief sharing period during which the teacher can reinforce the minilesson principle. Students write daily, applying critical principles to their own production of writing in a range of genres. Instruction in writing, in fact, contributes substantially to children’s understanding about words (Clay, 1991; NICHD, 2001). They learn to hear the sounds in words (phonemic awareness) and learn to look at letters and words in ways that support

- both reading and writing achievement (Lieberman, Shankweiler, & Lieberman, 1985; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987; Lundberg, Frost, & Petersen, 1998).
6. Word study (whole class). The teacher provides a minilesson on phonics and students apply the principle independently. While phonics and word study are embedded in all of the previously described contexts, here the instruction is preplanned, direct and explicit. The emphasis is on reveal to students important principles related to how words work as you read or spell them (Pinnell & Fountas, 1998).

More than being separate components of a curriculum, the reading and writing activities become a repertoire of practices that teachers weave together based on their pedagogical knowledge and their observation of children. This embodies a relative complex view of instructional practice and teacher decision making. Thus, understanding teacher progress and change in this practice is essential from a professional development perspective (as well as for evaluation).

Description of the Rubric

The rubric responds to the complexity of learning and the interrelated instructional components that are based on it. It is organized into three sections to capture the essential aspects of classroom instruction and interrelated student learning.

Section One. First is the set of instructional components that are part of the literacy framework. These include: (1) Interactive Read Aloud; (2) Shared Reading; (3) Guided Reading; (4) Interactive Writing; (5) Writing Workshop; and, (6) Word Study. The emphasis is on strong implementation of these activities and their sub-components. For example, in guided reading, there is a four point developmental scale for text selection, book introduction, teacher support during the reading, and teacher support after the reading. One important piece of data is simply whether or not the component was implemented during the observational period, which was designated as the entire language arts block. Since teachers would be implemented a whole range of new practices, the literacy coordinator would expect a gradual phase in of approaches over a year or even two years. Observers summarize the incidence of each practice, including the total number of hours/minutes used. These observations will give us an idea of the time it takes for innovations to be initiated and then deepened.

To look more closely at teaching, rubrics were created for each of the instructional contexts listed above. In previous work we had created and tested a set of scales that required a holistic rating of different instructional components and found a correlation with student achievement (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Using what we learned from that research, we set out to create a true descriptive rubric that would provide more detailed information about teaching within each context. Each rubric is categorized into the subcomponent parts of the particular instructional approach, with descriptions of practice from very beginning (almost non-implementation) to a very high level of implementation. The levels of the rubric move from alternative descriptions at level #1 to the same descriptions at level 4 (see example #1 for Guided Reading). These rubrics were designed to give us an idea of the nature of teaching and teacher change within each of these instructional components. To create them, we had to conduct intensive analysis of

the particular approaches and select aspects of the approach that would make a difference. We then described each level of a four-point scale.

As we designed these rubrics, we tried to capture the subtle differences between effective and weak teaching within the context. These differences could also be described as a continuum of learning for an individual teacher. For example, a teacher who is just beginning to learn to provide small group instruction (guided reading) might begin by simply going through the steps: (1) introduce the text; (2) read the text; (3) discuss the text. The lesson might look like guided reading but the teacher is operating on basically the same theory as he/she might have used in the previous program or basal. But guided reading requires that the teacher do some very specific teaching for strategies after the students have read a text. The score would be a 1--“Makes no teaching points even though there were opportunities to do so.”

After being coached and learning more, the same individual might teach a lesson that looks more like a 2--“Makes teaching points but they do not help students to engage in effective processing of texts.” After further work, the lesson might look like a 3--“Makes teaching points but not all of the teaching points help students engage in effective processing of text.” And the highest level on the rubric would be 4--“Makes superbly chosen, specific teaching points that help students engage in effective processing of texts.” The rubric for guided reading has seven different aspects to be rated, that a profile of any observed lesson would have multiple scores. The goal is to distinguish “going through the motions” from skillful teaching and to capture teacher learning over time.

Section Two. The second section involves assessment of the foundational aspects of teaching and classroom life, for example, organization of materials, quality of student talk, and development of classroom community. These attributes are crucial to productive activity in any classroom but perhaps especially so in the literacy collaborative framework where a great deal of activity is going on at any given time. Here the observer uses the rubric to evaluate classroom materials and organization, student engagement, the quality of interactions, and sense of community.

Section Three. The final section of the rubric was designed to address the idea of teaching for strategies across instructional contexts. For example, when they begin using a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, teachers may see a goal like “thinking beyond the text” as one skill to be taught in a single lesson or in a series of lesson within one instruction context. In fact, the highly effective teacher would be working across instructional contexts. A score of 4 would mean that the “teacher consistently asks questions that extend the meaning of the text and often bring out multiple perspectives; consistently prompts students for evidence from the text that elaborates and supports their answers.” The observer would see evidence of this behavior across interactive read aloud, shared reading, and guided reading.

The goal of reading instruction is to have students learn ways of thinking: literal thinking (in fiction and nonfiction texts); inferential and analytic thinking; word solving (including phonemic awareness and phonics); and, fluency and phrasing. Likewise, we seek to help students become fluid, expressive writers who understand how texts are organized and who have developed voice. Accomplishing these goals in the classroom involves more than fidelity in implementing the instructional activities. It entails coordinating students learning experiences so that they “add up” to produce strong, self-extending readers and writers.

Implications

Our goal in the design of this rubric was *not* to provide a simple numeric scale rubric to rate practice. Rather, the approach was to present a many-layered narrative description of what less expert to more expert instruction looks like in the classroom. The rubric will be useful in several ways. First, it offers a look inside the “black box” of instructional approaches by breaking them down into very specific subcomponents and examining the links between teacher and student behavior. Second, it provides concrete language for the professional developer or coach so that practice can be viewed on a continuum. The continuum of teacher change helps the observer or coach to recognize where teachers are in implementation as well as cues for what to focus on next. Rather than focus on fussy details that make little difference, they can keep the larger ideas in mind. Third, the rubric can also serve as a “map” for self-reflection for the individual teacher. Because it is developmental, teachers gain a description not only of where their current practice fits in relationship to the standards of the rubric but also what their practice may look like as it matures.

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