

Introduction

Assessments and evaluation have always existed in some form in public schooling in the United States. From the earliest days of colonial America, when selectmen visited homes to make sure parents were complying with statutes mandating that they teach their children to read, to current accountability testing procedures at national and state levels, we as a people have demonstrated a commitment to the future of our nation by assessing our efforts to educate future generations. However, not until recently have national initiatives focused so closely on assessment results to ensure that all students across socioeconomic levels, all races and ethnic groups, with any disabilities, demonstrate similarly high academic literacy proficiencies.

The Practical Guide to Classroom Literacy Assessment provides information about testing content and procedures that we believe is important for teachers, administrators, parents, and students. All assessments—national, state, district, and classroom based—have some similarities in their design and focus. All are directed at student achievement, whether it is to track progress of individual students or student cohorts, to determine the best allocation of resources, to evaluate materials and programs, or to refer individual students for specialized instruction. In addition, all assessments come with predetermined sets of criteria for evaluation, and all can be viewed from multiple perspectives. We owe it to our students to help them with this newest of literacies, assessment literacy, to deal with the inevitable testing they will experience.

One important way to deal with these assessments is to help students learn to anticipate what test items will be asked. Students who can look at a math illustration or a social studies graph and already begin to think about what kinds of questions will accompany the pictorial often are at an advantage over those who are still trying to figure out what the drawing represents. By the same token, the main reason smart students miss problems they should have aced is that they anticipate to the point of answering the wrong question; that is, the one that immediately came to mind instead of the one actually being asked. Good readers and listeners use background knowledge to predict and ask questions before and as they read or listen and reflect, and they alter their questions and predictions as they read and contemplate the text's meaning. Good test takers do, too.

In this book, we hope to give teachers and their students some expectations for testing items and ways to help students anticipate the types of questions they will be asked. Through assessments in multiple formats and as part of regular instructional practice, thoughtfully planned instructional activities can

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be adapted to the needs of students who have not learned from instruction designed to meet the needs of most students. By involving students in these multiple assessments of their own learning, we can assist them in setting goals and monitoring their own progress as a part of their total instructional plan.

Testing tools and instruments should be part of total evaluation feedback; that is, the beginning of evaluation, not the end. We offer rubrics and checklists in the following chapters as a means to an end, not an end in themselves. They offer a basis for student-teacher discussions that guide future instruction and are framed to help students think about ways they can improve performance rather than a means of defining their lack of proficiency.

The focus of this book is literacy assessments—not just the anticipated reading tests but also assessments designed to measure writing, listening, speaking, and viewing and their implications for classroom instruction and student learning. We know that teachers will value the information presented here and use it to meet the strengths and needs of their students through assessments that guide instruction and enhance student learning. We anticipate that this information will also provide a basis for collegial discussions on assessments and instruction and informative parent conferences on student progress.