

Early Literacy Assessment *for* Learning: Anecdotes from a School in Kosrae

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Pacific educators have identified three critical issues facing them: (1) the need to improve student performance in early reading, (2) the need for schools and communities to have better information about how well students are doing, and (3) the need for teachers and administrators to improve the teaching and learning environment by focusing on student achievement (Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, 2000). This article responds to those concerns.

As staff of the Pacific Regional Educational Laboratory (Pacific REL), the authors work with Pacific educators to improve early reading literacy through the Pacific Communities with High-Performance in Literacy Development (Pacific CHILD) project. In this article, we draw on our live(d) experience as participants in this project, using anecdotal evidence to describe the development and use of early literacy assessments for learning at a school in Kosrae in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). We believe that discussions of local language (L1) matters in print literacy and using assessment information to meet the needs of early literacy learners has the potential to extend teachers' understandings and practices of what it means to teach early L1 readers and writers.

WHY ASSESS IN THE EARLY LITERACY CLASSROOM?

The call for classroom assessment in early literacy is well established (Caldwell, 2002; Johnston & Rogers, 2001; Rabinowitz, Wong, & Filby, 2002); effective early literacy assessment practices can yield valuable information for teachers. Many teachers use the information to create individual profiles that describe the emerging readers and writers in their classrooms. More significantly, the use of assessment information has the potential to inform teaching and learning activities in early literacy classrooms; that is, with evidence of what the child can actually do in particular areas of language and literacy, teachers can work toward "closing the gap" between where children are now and where they should be by the end of the grade (William, 2001).

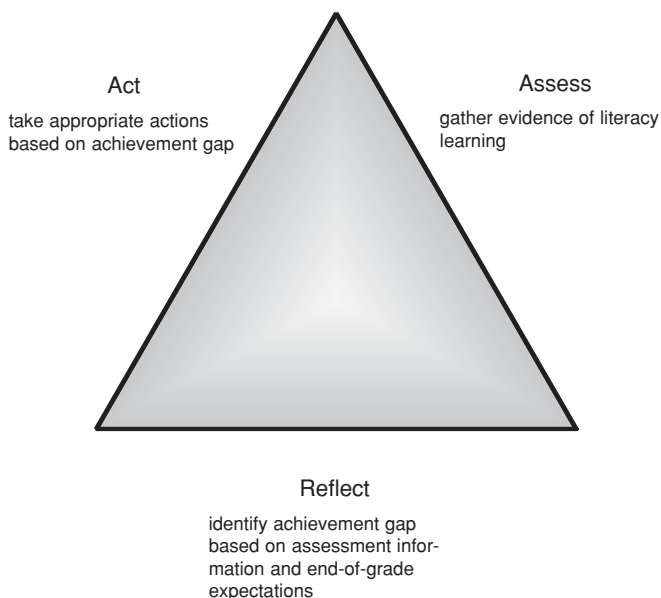
ASSESSMENT *FOR* LEARNING

To address the needs raised by Pacific educators, the Pacific CHILD project identifies ways in which teachers gather and use information about the children they teach to inform their planning and teaching activities. Dialogue about assessments for learning has been a focus for teachers early in the project. We found that many teachers have been educated in a system that promotes the assessment of learning – testing or assessment that comes at the end of instruction to prove whether or not teaching and learning has taken place. Assessment for learning uses evidence gathered on an ongoing basis to

improve student learning, addressing the strengths and needs of each learner (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2002). This is a significant shift for teachers, as they need to be willing to risk changing how they go about their assessment work in the literacy classroom.

Three key aspects of assessment for learning have been a focus of discussion in Kosrae: (1) gathering assessment information, (2) interpreting the information, and (3) following up with appropriate action in the classroom. We work with teachers to help them create profiles of each literacy learner in their classrooms, using the ongoing collection of assessment information to document changes over time of each child's strengths and needs. In this way, the literacy curriculum is based on specificity (or the needs of particular children) rather than a predetermined curriculum developed on generalities and assumptions about universal needs. We use Figure 1 to help teachers visualize assessment for learning. It is also used for focused discussion on issues in assessing literacy and bilingualism at the school in Kosrae.

FIGURE 1
Assessment for Learning



Teachers who assess for learning gather and record specific information related to, in this case, the literacy needs and interests of the children in their classrooms. They observe children engaged in literacy events, have conversations with them, and provide opportunities for them to perform or demonstrate their knowledge and skills in literacy events such as reading aloud. One aspect of this work helps teachers to identify achievement gaps for the children in their classrooms. With the recorded information, teachers determine what the

child can do while keeping in mind what the child is expected to do by the end of the grade (these expectations are often set as grade level standards). The achievement gap (see Figure 2) varies from child to child and is ever-changing.

FIGURE 2
Identifying an Achievement Gap



Reflecting on the two points of learning in Figure 2, teachers act thoughtfully to plan teaching activities that address the literacy needs and interests of each child in the classroom, closing the achievement gap and, for some children, helping them exceed end-of-grade expectations. For example, at the beginning of the school year at one school in Kosrae, students in grades K–2 were assessed on listening to and then retelling a story in Kosraean. Teachers were asked to reflect on this information in relation to the standard or expectation set for retelling by the end of their grade level. This helped teachers identify the achievement gap for “listen and retell” for each child and plan various activities that would move each child closer to grade-level expectations. It is an approach that places the child at the center of everyday curricular practices and encourages teachers to raise questions about their work. Such reflective practice is an essential process of assessment for learning and can be framed by questions such as the ones outlined in Table 1.

Kosraean teachers willing to engage in reflective practices through questioning have shown more interest in the literacy strengths and needs of their children and seem to be the ones willing to take risks and experiment with new ways of teaching and learning in the classroom. They have a daunting task: preparing children to be literate in two languages, Kosraean and English.

The Department of Education (DOE) in Kosrae has a well established transitional bilingual program; children spend time in kindergarten through grade 2 becoming literate in Kosraean and then transition to English beginning in grade 3. Teachers told us they learned most about their children by observing them and through occasional conversations. They confirmed that there were no early literacy assessments available to them in Kosraean. In collaboration with the DOE and school staff, we began a process of identifying research-based early literacy assessments in English and then critically considered them for possible adaptation to the local language.

TABLE 1
Questions That Frame Assessment for Learning

Aspects of Assessment for Learning	Reflective Practice: Questions Teachers Ask Themselves
Assess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do I know about the literacy behaviors of the children I teach? • What aspects of literacy should I be assessing? • What assessment tools are available in L1, in English? • How will I collect and record the information?
Reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I make sense of the student information? • What does it tell me about the literacy behaviors of the children I teach? • How does this information correspond with standards or end-of-grade expectations? • How will this information change what I do in the language arts block?
Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the information, what should I be teaching next? • What (support, materials) do I need to ensure the plan can succeed? • How can I do more of what works and less of what doesn't? • How can I explicitly teach specific components of literacy that the children need? • How can I be a literacy role model? • How can I use the space in my literacy classroom more effectively? • How can I organize my classroom time so that I can work with individual readers and writers?

EARLY LITERACY ASSESSMENTS

Part of the Pacific CHILD research that impacted the Kosraean site involved collecting multiple sources of evidence (Salinger, 2001) that would profile the emerging reader/writer. Six classroom assessments that aligned with the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) and the related Reading First initiative were initially developed in English. They were Concepts About Print, Letter Recognition, Sight Word Identification, Phonological/Phoneme Awareness, Written Story Construction, and Listen and Retell. Table 2 briefly describes the purpose of each assessment.

The assessments were first adapted to Kosraean by the Pacific CHILD reading specialist and then taken to the school and community for collaborative review. Local linguists, central office reading specialists, and teachers engaged in important conversations about language and literacy to improve the quality of the assessments. Validity issues continue to arise, especially with Letter Recognition because of a changing orthography, and with Phonological/Phoneme Awareness because of the syllabic (not phonemic) emphasis of the Kosraean language.

TABLE 2
Early Literacy Assessments Developed in Kosraean

Early Reading Assessments	Knowledge/Skills Assessed
Concepts About Print	Understanding certain conventions of print such as the front and back of a book, letters, words, and directionality.
Letter Recognition	How the child knows upper- and lowercase letters (by sound, name, and/or word).
Sight Word Identification	Ability to quickly identify commonly used and frequently occurring words. Many of these are words that cannot be decoded.
Phonological/Phoneme Awareness	Phonological and phoneme awareness (e.g., ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in words, syllables, rhymes).
Written Story Construction	Ability to produce a narrative genre and use appropriate conventions of print such as capitalization and punctuation.
Listen and Retell	Ability to orally recall the structure and details of a story read aloud.

Local Language Matters

Even though it was the early explorers and missionaries who gave the Kosraean language an alphabet, to this day it is knowledge of the oral character of the language that children bring to school. Children are already familiar with the participatory nuances of Kosraean as well as its vibrant inconsistencies and highly complex phonological markings. Creating effective early literacy assessments in Kosraean is made more challenging by the tensions between a living, oral language and the effects of an imposed alphabetic system intended to make the language static. This system “effectively severed all ties between the written letters and the sensible world from which they were derived” (Abram, 1996, p. 111). The differences between oral and written forms of Kosraean has significance for literacy achievement and requires the involvement of community consensus in decisions surrounding language use and its linguistic orthography and grammar.

Creating the assessments in Kosraean provided opportunities for professional development for all of us, especially the challenge of considering how oral language features differ from their written forms, which forced collaborators to think through what counts in learning to read and write in Kosraean. For example, when making decisions about which words to include in Sight Word Identification, a common understanding of the term “sight words” was established: most sight words are structure or function words that have no referent (e.g., “the” or “was”). These words are usually more difficult for

children to learn than words that have concrete referents such as “dog” or “cat.” They often have an irregular sound-symbol correspondence and are difficult to decode and therefore best learned as a total unit rather than by individual letters or word parts. Since most Pacific languages are phonetically regular, we questioned whether sight words, as defined in English, exist in the L1. Instead, we turned to those frequently occurring words that children should quickly be able to identify and know.

The small number of children’s resources available in Kosraean led us to pay attention to words that occur frequently in the oral language. Kosraean is a language rich in shortened word forms. The word *tuh* or *tuhshruk* (its varied oral form) and *tuhshrukhtuh* (its written form) occurs frequently. (The literal English translations for these words are, respectively, “but,” “thus,” and “therefore/hence.”) Questions immediately arose from the discussion. Which form do we use in the assessment? If we use the multisyllabic written form, it no longer falls within the established definition of a sight word, since *tuhshrukhtuh* is easily decodable. Such discussions fostered professional development and provided an opportunity to share our learning and questioning with parents and community members. This strengthened community-school relations and gave parents (and us) insight into the complexities of learning to read in a language with oral and written forms that have evolved for very different purposes. Collaborative decisions that were understood to be arbitrary were made collectively after lengthy discussions. Assessments were then piloted within a supportive community that put reading and language development in children first.

Assessing, Reflecting, and Acting on Assessment Information

Primary teachers at this school were asked to administer the six early literacy assessments at the beginning (entry) and end (exit) of the school year. They were given training and were encouraged to use the teacher recording forms to guide their instruction, therefore addressing the needs of the children in their classroom. This shift is a significant one that takes time, as it requires teachers and students to “live” differently in their classrooms. As part of the process of beginning to rethink how assessment gets done, teachers were encouraged to observe two or three children each day, noting evidence of learning that focused on a specific teaching point. For example, if the assessment information indicated that several children did not know the letters of the alphabet, then the teacher would plan an activity that addressed learning alphabet letter names and, while teaching, observe and make notes on the learning of certain preselected children. Observing and recording without evaluating is difficult but essential in the practice of assessment *for* learning. Its purpose is to inform instructional prac-

tices without judgment; it is key to changing practices that address the specific needs of the children in the classroom.

As assessment information was compiled for each of grades 1–3, conversations on end-of-grade expectations began to take place, connecting teachers to each other and providing opportunities for input, reflection, and follow-up. These events began linking professional conversations with professional practice, “effecting broader change” (Andrews & Rothman, 2002, p. 2) across the school. Teachers talked about how to support student needs, sharing with each other successful instructional activities that have now impacted more than one classroom. Activities, including collecting assessment information and interpreting, reflecting, and acting on that information within a standards-based framework continued over the next few months and helped to move the school toward important changes benefiting the literacy education of the children. We continued to work one-on-one with teachers in classrooms, using specific assessment information to meet the needs of individual early literacy learners. The same assessment information was also being prepared for bar graph display to be used in conversations with teachers across grades and with parents about school and grade-level performances in early literacy.

The bar graphs were shared in different meetings with staff and community. As a result, the teachers decided to focus on writing narratives, an area that had been identified across grades as needing attention. Immediately following the setting of this goal, we provided professional development on the writing process. The majority of these activities occurred as embedded professional development in which staff spent time in the classroom during instruction and coached teachers as they took risks in trying new ideas in their instructional practices. Teachers were encouraged to be mutually supportive through team teaching, observing each other, and sharing their experiences in the classroom. These activities were not easily carried out since the school had not engaged in this kind of reform before. While assessment scores increased at the end of the school year, there is no claim that professional development innovations were the reason for the increase, even though teachers acknowledged that they were trying new approaches to writing narratives in their classrooms.

ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Early literacy assessment has played a multifaceted role in supporting change, strengthening community-school connections, and improving communication at the classroom, school, and community levels. Initially, assessment was introduced to teachers in an effort to inform their practices and allow them to address the literacy needs of each child. Assessing for learning was an unfamiliar concept to most teachers and parents. Even when it made sense theoretically, it was difficult to enact

because of the felt need to teach first and then assess. The teachers wanted the children to succeed and often switched roles from assessor to teacher during the assessment. The process of having the child demonstrate what he or she can do without teacher support and then reflecting on that sample of work to better understand the child's needs was new to the teachers, yet they were willing to try to learn from their experiences. This contributed to small but significant changes as it raised their awareness about what counts in early literacy and how to observe and record evidence of what a child can do.

The school staff continues to discuss and build on their utilization of assessment information for the benefit of the children they teach. It is not easy. Traditional assessment routines still hold much sway in the islands. Yet, through dialogue and a willingness to risk and experiment, teachers are shifting their thinking and altering their routines, placing the children in their care at the center of teaching and learning. This creates opportunities to involve the community and teachers in conversations on language and literacy and grade-level literacy expectations. In the process of collecting assessment information, teachers deepen their awareness of early literacy processes and what is required of an early reader and writer in two languages. Perhaps more significantly, assessment was the catalyst that ignited vital conversations about oral cultural traditions, local knowledge, and links to school literacy as community members and staff shared their expertise on what counts in learning to read and write in Kosraean. Most importantly, assessing early literacy has helped teachers come to know each child in their classroom—a key element of effective teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998).

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