Inquiry into Assessment Strategies: From Kidwatching to Responsive Teaching

Heidi Mills with Tim O’Keefe

Inquiry into Naturally Occurring Data

“Mr. O, you don’t want to miss this!” Jordan exclaims as she shoves a clipboard into her third-grade teacher’s hands and begins pulling him toward her table. Jordan knows her teacher will appreciate the conversation she and her friends are having over a book they are composing together about the Titanic. She knows that he will want to take notes to capture their questions, connections, and ideas; their ways of negotiating; and most importantly, their passions as readers and writers. Jordan also knows that her teacher will most likely want to invite them to highlight a strategy they are using during their whole-class strategy-sharing session that concludes writing workshop. Like a good kidwatcher (Goodman, 1978; O’Keefe, 1996), Jordan’s teacher, Tim O’Keefe, accepts her invitation and joins the group with clipboard, pen, and notes in hand, eagerly anticipating what he might learn about them as readers and writers. He suspects they might also shed light on his understanding of how to craft a compelling nonfiction text. You see, in this classroom, the teacher and the children move fluidly in and out of mentor and apprentice roles.

Jordan’s prediction holds. Her teacher invites them to share their strategy with the class to conclude writing workshop. Jordan knows it is both her right and her responsibility to invite her teacher into important learning moments; Mr. O’Keefe has been working with her class for over a year. Tim and his colleagues “loop” with their students, meaning that children live and learn with the same teacher for two consecutive years. And it is through careful kidwatching over extended periods of time that teachers truly get to know their students.

Assessment strategies within the culture of inquiry, in Tim’s room and across the school, promote an expanded view of literacy and grow out of naturally occurring data. When holistic teachers collect, interpret, and teach out of naturally occurring data, their assessment practices are theoretically congruent with their instruction. This vision of curriculum and assessment prepares students for engaged and productive citizenship in a democratic world. As Johnston (2005) argues, “These kinds of literacies are also necessary if students are to help societies evolve into strong democracies—literacies in which it seems natural to consider others’ interests and views as strongly as one’s own, knowing that engaging them opens possibilities for new meaning, solutions, and actions. Our assessments must reflect and encourage these literacies” (p. 684). This article reveals beliefs and practices that promote growth and change in individual and collective literacies. In so doing, it illuminates the importance of learning to look at naturally occurring data and classroom conversations as critical assessment information.

Aligning Assessments with Curricular Beliefs and Practices

The notion that assessment is central to thoughtful, informed instruction is well established in the field (Owocki & Goodman, 2002; Strickland & Strickland, 2000). However, as we expand our vision of literacy instruction to best prepare learners for living and working as engaged citizens in a democratic society, it is imperative that we embrace assessment strategies theoretically congruent with the beliefs and practices that ground our curricula. Data presented in this article reflects collaborative research conducted at the Center for Inquiry (CFI), a public magnet elementary school in Richland School District Two, established in 1996 as a small school partnership with the University of South Carolina.
At the Center for Inquiry, we believe the relationship between inquiry and democracy is so important that we explicitly address democracy in our mission statement:

The students, parents, and staff of the Center for Inquiry are responsible for developing ourselves as more thoughtful, caring, and intelligent people who delight in learning and are committed to creating a more compassionate, equitable, knowledgeable, and democratic world!

While most mission statements reflect noble qualities, this one actively serves as a philosophical touchstone—the CFI faculty and university partners access it regularly as they work to bring these beliefs to life within classrooms and across the school.

As the university partner and collaborative researcher, I have been collecting and analyzing audiotapes, videotapes, field notes, and classroom artifacts within and across classrooms for fifteen years. This extensive data set has been used to document the evolution of the curriculum (Mills & Donnelly, 2001) and to promote inquiry for ongoing professional development and school renewal through weekly curricular conversations (Mills, Jennings, Donnelly, & Mueller, 2001). While the insights featured in this article reflect the stance that we, the entire CFI faculty, take toward learning and learners; the sign systems, such as language, mathematics, art, and music; and the knowledge domains in the sciences and social sciences. At CFI, children inquire as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists. Teachers engage in collaborative inquiry in front of and alongside their students daily. They also engage in professional inquiry as they reflect on and revise their own teaching and assessment practices. This article is devoted to professional inquiry into assessment opportunities that are theoretically congruent with holistic beliefs, those that help us better understand literacy learners and the literacy learning process itself.

**Knowing Children as Readers and Writers**

Tim begins each year by making space in his curriculum for both a reading conference and a written conversation (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) with each child in his classroom. He does so because he sees his role as much more than simply teaching reading and writing—he teaches readers and writers. And to do so, he begins with kidwatching. Tim gathers information that reflects his students' strengths, needs, and interests as readers and writers. He uses his observations and interpretations to make wise choices about books he might select for literature circle conversations; books he might recommend for individuals during independent reading; and strategies he might share with individuals, small groups, and the whole class. Only after reflecting on carefully collected assessment data can he make wise decisions about the next genre study, author study, or craft lesson he might offer to individuals, a small group, or the entire class. As Tim puts it, “Careful kidwatching notes help to document children’s growth over time…these observations may become strategy lessons and instructional invitations when patterns emerge” (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004).

**Inquiry into Assessment Opportunities During and After Independent Reading**

In the past Tim and I have used many assessment tools without question, especially those developed by mentors we trust and admire. However, we have recently found that it is critical to adopt an inquiry stance toward the assessment tools themselves. When we interpret the value of data gathered from both formal and informal assessments, we are empowered to make better decisions.

Like many holistic teachers over the past twenty years, Tim and I have accessed the Burke Reading Interview...
(Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987) to gather information on children’s perceptions of themselves as readers and their understanding of the reading process. Although the interview questions have garnered fruitful information to make informed teaching moves, we have recently noticed a disconnect between children’s answers in an interview setting and their spontaneous responses when engaged in reflective conversations during and immediately following Independent Reading (IR). The children frequently say they “sound-it-out” in response to the interview question: “When you are reading and come to something you don’t know, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?” (Goodman et al., 1987). We have also noticed that the same children offer a much broader range of strategies when asked what they do when they come to something they don’t know during reflective conversations immediately following IR. As Tim and I have inquired, we’ve come to realize his students offer “sound-it-out,” like a knee-jerk reaction reflecting a common cultural myth about reading rather than the actual strategies they employ during reading.

Since students often default to “sound-it-out” when responding to the interview questions in isolation, Tim has revised the ways he accesses their perceptions of reading strategies. He has created a simple yet elegant invitation in which he invites his students to self-monitor and then jot down one or two reading strategies they use during IR on sticky notes. They form a circle to conclude their Independent Reading time, and Tim orchestrates a collaborative conversation around the strategies they generate. This innovation on Retrospective Miscue Analysis (Goodman & Merek, 1996) better serves Tim as a kidwatcher, helps his students inquire into strategies they actually employ rather than the actual strategies they employ during reading.

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On one particular morning in the fall, Tim and his second graders explored the question, As a reader, what do you do when you come to something you don’t know?

**Ella:** If I don’t know what’s going on I read the page over slower. I think to see if I have seen the word before.

**Ella:** When I come to a hard word I think what would make sense (sense).

**Clirae:** I think about it to see if I saw the word before and if I can’t get it then I go on and still understand the story.

**Tucker:** I looked at the picture and the picture told me what the words are.

**Carly:** I reread it if I don’t understand and then come back to it later.

**Cady:** I was trying to figure out a last name and so covered parts of the word and sounded it out.

**Cody:** I looked at the pictures in the comics to figure out who is who.

**Isabel:** I don’t even look at the individual letters, I just get into the story and think about it.

Tim considers the children’s sticky notes to be valuable data and adds them to his clipboard filled with kidwatching notes. He also participates in the strategy-sharing conversations in order to clarify, connect, validate, and extend children’s understanding of reading strategies. At CFI, “Teachers and children continually interpret each others’ insights, ideas, and questions, and in so doing, collaboratively inquire” (Mills, 2005, p. 2). Below is an example of the strategy:

**Kaylie:** If there was something that I didn’t understand, like a sentence or something, I would come back and I’d read it over.

**Tim:** So reading it over was kind of what Ella was saying. You know, if you don’t get it, go back. Give it another shot. Sometimes if you read on a little bit, read on for the rest of the sentence, and then come back to it, you come to it with more information. So that’ll help you too. Clirae.

**Clirae:** I think about it and see if I saw the word before, and if I can’t get it I just go on and I still understand the story. Most of the time.

**Tim:** So that’s sort of the “keep going” strategy that I mentioned. You know, just move ahead. Cody?

**Cody:** Well, um, all I wrote down was that I look at the pictures and, it’s, I was reading Sonic The Hedgehog II ‘cause Richard (classmate) lets me borrow, Richard lets me read them during IR and stuff like that, and there was the evil Sonic and the good Sonic and they looked exactly alike and I was trying to figure out who was who.
Tim: And so the pictures helped you to do all that. Yes, certain texts, the pictures are very helpful. In some texts the pictures are there just sort of as decorations. But in comic books and those kinds of things, and in nonfiction books . . . Like if you’re reading chemistry or biology, a lot of times there’ll be diagrams, or pictures that go right with the text. And if you really want to understand it, you have to tap into those.

Cody: Because all I could tell was Sonic, the good Sonic, was wearing shoes and the bad Sonic wasn’t.

Tim: Oh, so you had to keep looking at their feet to keep the meaning going. All right.

These insights clearly offer the teacher valuable information regarding children’s perceptions of the reading process and the strategies they use when they come to something they don’t know. Burke’s compelling question is explored in-depth but it is done so “in the midst of” and “immediately following” reading. This professional inquiry into information gleaned from naturally occurring data (the sticky notes) and focused conversations provides Tim greater access to his students’ genuine understandings, strengths, and needs as readers. Additionally, the forum for conversations around their ideas makes it possible for individual insights to become part of the classroom thought collective, promoting literacy and democracy simultaneously.

This naturally occurring classroom data has been available to Tim for years. It wasn’t until he noticed the anomaly or the disconnect between his students’ responses when conducting the Burke Reading Interview formally and the answers his children provided when responding to the same questions in a more natural setting that he could truly assess the value of the information he was gathering. Given what we know about Carolyn Burke, we predict she would embrace Tim’s inquiry as she celebrates teacher agency. When teachers ask questions about assessment data and consider formal data in light of what their young readers and writers show them day in and day out, they can use tools rather than be used by them. The Burke Reading Interview questions have gained new power for Tim now that he uses them to frame reflective conversations around the reading process.

Collaborative Inquiry: What Is Reading?

After spending a year with his second-grade class, Tim loops to third grade with them. From the beginning of second grade he engages his students in reflective conversations around reading strategies that promote meaning construction. Reading is not portrayed as a technical set of skills; instead, Tim and his young readers explore what it means to be a strategic reader, how to live and learn as readers, how to be both informed and transformed through texts. In third grade, Tim deepens their inquiry into the reading process by inviting his students to explore the question, What is reading? He asks them to document their thoughts in writing. They then form a circle and read their responses using a strategy entitled “Waterfall of Words,” in order to simply hear children’s pure insights and ideas, one flowing into another. There is tremendous power in this strategy, as it sounds and feels much like a collective poem created around a critical question. Tim opens with the question, and then their ideas simply flow.

Tim: What is reading?

Erin: What reading is to me: Reading is understanding. If you don’t understand what you read then it is not really reading. Reading is learning to read and write. You can learn to write because most books are well crafted.

Sydney: Reading is to me is understanding, getting into the book, getting into your character. Mind picturing how you think your characters look like and feel like. Reading to me is feeling something about your character, like sad, happy, glad, mad, fearless, or maybe all. Reading helps good writers be good book writers, which passes on.

Ikia: Reading is loving and wanting to read more in the book. Reading is like a bee making sweet honey in the book. Reading is getting close to the characters in the book. Reading is looking at ink on the paper that means something. Reading is UNDERSTANDING the book that you read. Reading is having a good friend (in the book) the way we are. Reading is whatever you want it to be. Reading is having fun with words.
Martin:  What reading is to me! I think reading to me is: experiencing new worlds, discovering a forbidden land, getting sucked into a different dimension. That’s what reading is to me!

Morgan:  Reading is a great adventure, inside a little book, and once I take a look inside the little book, I get on the hook, and can’t turn away. I go around the world, without leaving my room, the library, or wherever I’m reading. Nothing else exists, just me and the book, alone in our world, the best of friends, just me and the book.

And so it goes. Twenty-two children bring their perceptions of reading to the circle, creating a collective vision of the process. This sharing session portrays a deep understanding of Rosenblatt’s (1995) notion that the reader and text come together to create a poem. Tim and the children bring who they are as readers to this reflective engagement just as they do to texts. Tim grows to know and appreciate his students’ sophisticated insights about reading, and they push him to deepen his appreciation of the transactive nature of the reading process itself (Rosenblatt, 1995). Tim’s students learn more about one another as readers and get more in touch with the reading process itself (Mills, 2005). This profound moment in time reflects what is possible when teachers engage children in collaborative inquiries. All learners, tall and small, leave conversations like this knowing more about the reading process, their friends, and their classroom teachers, as well as more about themselves as readers.
Knowing, Being Known, and Being in Touch with the Process

The more we inquire into our culture, the more we recognize that talk is at the heart of responsive teaching (Johnston, 2004; Mills et al., 2004). In fact, we have learned that responsive teaching begins but doesn’t end with kidwatching. It is the conversations that teachers have with students and students have with one another that make the critical difference. When teachers make decisions based on observations alone, they are doing unto their students. When they invite children into the process through conversation, they make space for planning with and for students.

We have come to recognize three critical dimensions of collaborative inquiry: teachers knowing students; students knowing each other and their teachers; and students knowing themselves as readers, writers, and learners (Mills, 2005). (See Figure 2.)

Teachers must know their students in order to plan demonstrations and engagements that reflect their needs and interests. However, knowing students is not sufficient. Our research has revealed that it is equally important for the children to know each other and their teachers. Teachers best mentor their students by talking with them reader-to-reader and writer-to-writer and by helping them learn to talk with one another as accomplished, strategic readers and writers.

Finally, we have learned that teachers accelerate literacy growth by being deliberate about helping children get in touch with themselves as readers, writers, and learners. When children learn to reflect on themselves as readers, writers, and learners, to intentionally outgrow themselves, they become reflexive. Reflexivity leads to planful action, which, in turn, fosters identity and agency in learners (Johnston, 2004). The previous vignettes from Tim’s room reflect all three dimensions of this model. As a responsive teacher, Tim creates curriculum with and for his students by devising engagements that enable him to truly know his students; that help his students know him and one another; and that help them better know themselves as readers, writers, and learners.

Lessons Learned: Inquiry into Assessment Strategies

At the Center for Inquiry we have grown to trust the power of inquiry. When an anomaly emerges in our teaching or assessment practices, we no longer dismiss it. Rather, we have learned to embrace it in anticipation of what might be learned from the investigation. Too often, in our field, a static view of assessment strategies and assessment tools is promoted. Teachers are “trained” to passively implement assessments and use data garnered in specific ways designed by the author, publisher, or district office.

At the Center for Inquiry, we believe in empowering teachers to appreciate and use tools effectively by adopting an inquiry stance toward their use. When doing so, teachers often gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the assessment itself because they investigate it from the inside out. When teachers begin asking questions about teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment opportunities in light of their children’s literacy growth, they grow as strategic, professional, decision makers and as responsive teachers.

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• use tools and not be used by them;
• transform tools to meet their needs as teachers;
• access naturally occurring classroom data for key assessment information;
• foster classroom conversations around assessments to promote growth and change;
• make informed instructional decisions from kidwatching data;
• create opportunities and devise assessments that are theoretically congruent with new literacies;
• know children as readers, writers, and learners;
• provide opportunities for children to know one another and their teacher;
• be deliberate about helping children know themselves as readers, writers, and learners; and
• ground assessment in democratic practices.

May our professional experiences at the Center for Inquiry and the stories from Tim O’Keefe’s room help you see the value of an inquiry stance for both teachers and students. It truly makes all the difference in the world.

Note

All ideas and findings in this article represent the perspective of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Richland School District Two or the University of South Carolina. The Center for Inquiry, K–5 magnet program of the Richland School District Two and University of South Carolina small school partnership, is not affiliated with the Center for Inquiry, Inc.

Works Cited


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