

0406

## Using Children's Literature to Assess Reading Comprehension in the Early Years of School

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### Background

This topic has been an important focus in research in a longitudinal study designed to follow students' growth in literacy and numeracy from the commencement of primary school to Year 6. The study was also designed to capture information about the wide distribution of achievement amongst children from the earliest years at school. The assessment approaches developed for the original longitudinal study have been used in a number of major studies, and have been the model for other assessments.

A key feature of the literacy assessment has been the use of quality children's literature, in the form of picture story books read aloud to the children, in order to identify students' knowledge of many aspects of narrative texts, and their skills in recognising, explaining and making connections with the themes and ideas in the texts. The selection of texts appropriate for these purposes has raised many points of interest, such as the complexity of ideas that children can access from such texts, and the power of the visual images that play a central role in picture story books.

### Research Questions

A longitudinal study of students' development in literacy and numeracy from the time they entered school until they reached Year 6 identified a number of key research questions. What critical aspects of literacy should be assessed in each of the seven years in order to gather evidence of development over time? What aspects should be assessed in the earliest years? A specific question concerned the extent to which it was important to assess the knowledge and understandings young children have about characters, settings, plots, themes and ideas from story books read aloud.

The intention to develop a comprehensive rather than narrow view of literacy development led to the decision to include assessment tasks probing students' understanding of the content of a picture story book, as well as tasks targeting their skills in recognising print in the environment, alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, fluency in reading aloud, and writing. The literacy assessments used in the study from 1999-2005 have recently been extensively revised, for use in future studies. This revision was informed by the data and analyses from the original longitudinal study, as well as from several other major research projects in which the set of five literacy assessments spanning the first three years at had been used. In the course of the revision, questions about the use of children's literature in the form of picture story books, have been re-examined.

The data showed that while, at the end of the first year of school, 43.4% of students in the sample were able to explain how the title of the story referred to the central idea, another 10% were unable to explain this. Other data showed that, at the beginning of Year 2, 71% of students could explain how a main character's feeling changed, while 23% were unable to explain this. Therefore, in order to probe the wide distribution of students' understanding, the selection of books with literary value and some complexity, covering themes likely to engage and challenge students, and convey meaning through both print and visual images, is essential.

The comprehension items are based around texts of sufficient complexity to provide opportunities to ask questions that can be answered by stating information directly stated in the text, as well as questions that require students to make inferences and to reflect on how the text relates to their own experience.

### Methods

The opportunity to prepare a new set of literacy assessments based on the detailed revision involved several stages. Data analyses from previous projects in which the original assessments had been used, including the main longitudinal study, were reviewed. The purpose of this review was to determine how effectively the items used in those assessments had captured evidence of the distribution of achievement amongst students in the different samples. The most effective assessments included items found to be easy for most students, as well as items found difficult by many students. The picture story books selected were re-examined, to identify the range of opportunities they provided to ask questions requiring literal interpretation, inference and reflection.

## **Frame**

The study was underpinned by the concept of developmental assessment, which involves the development of progress maps to describe typical progression of development in an area of learning over time. Locating students' achievements on the same scale over time makes it possible to describe individual development over time, or to compare the progress of groups of students. The scales used in this study were constructed using the Rasch model. The Rasch analyses involved identified aspects of literacy development that were assessed in items found to be easy by most students, as well as items that were found to be very difficult by most students.

## **Research findings**

The review and development of new literacy assessment items that probed students' understanding of literary texts read aloud affirmed the initial decision to include such tasks in a comprehensive literacy assessment. Access to data from previous projects clarified the nature of the evidence of student achievement. Other data informing the review included feedback from teachers who had administered the tasks, and their reports of students' enjoyment of the activity. The diagnostic information provided by these assessments has proved useful to classroom teachers.

Instead of commercially available picture story books, new picture story books have been commissioned for the assessments so that they can be held secure for future research projects. The item developers formed an editorial review committee, and liaised with writers and illustrators during the drafting and editing of these books. Samples of the assessment items will be discussed in the paper, and the processes involved in developing these items explained. The analysis of data from trialling of the new items will determine the quality of the items, and the spread of students' achievement. An interesting finding has been that the tasks provided information about students' response to literacy texts, as well as about their comprehension of these texts.