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A NEW LANGUAGE ARTS FRAMEWORK

I titled this book *Closing the Circle* in part because that's what I've done with the framework over the past twenty years. I started in Manchester Elementary (Manchester Center, Vermont) in the late 1980s with just one part of the framework—articulating literacy attributes—and ever since then, I've been filling in the rest of the circle. To be honest, I didn't even think of it as a circle until quite recently, but as each of the elements was added, it inevitably took on a circular shape.

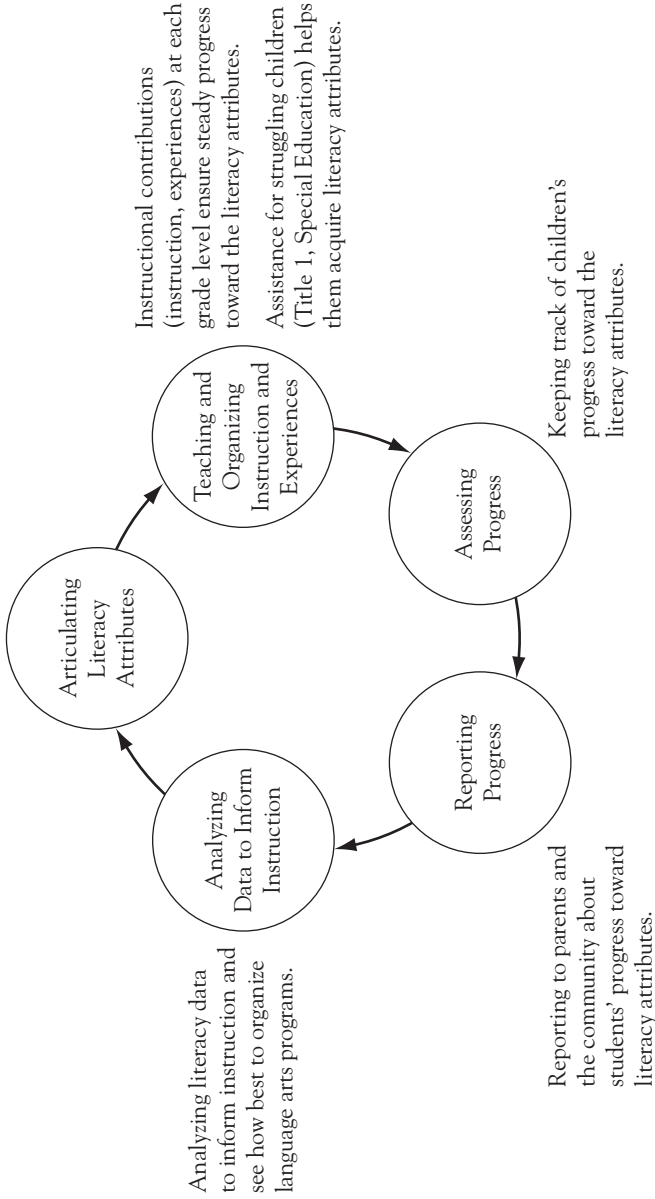
The framework consists of a set of five related components:

1. *Literacy attributes* (clear, simple expectations we have for all students)
2. *Instructional contributions* (what instruction and experiences each grade level must provide in order for students to acquire the attributes, as well as what is needed to support struggling learners)
3. *Assessments* of students' progress toward the attributes (through a variety of informal and formal assessments)
4. *Reports* on students' progress toward the attributes (to parents via report cards and progress reports)
5. *Analysis of data* to inform instruction and to revise components of the framework

In this chapter, I'll provide a brief overview of each of these components but will first discuss some basic assumptions about the

Exhibit 1.1. A Framework for Language Arts.

What we want children to know, be able to do, and have experienced in language arts, K–12.



framework and explain the literacy philosophy that undergirds it. Exhibit 1.1 shows a graphic representation of the framework.

Basic Assumptions

The framework rests on some basic assumptions about what counts as literacy and how the various components are related to one another. A language arts curriculum has to address all aspects of both receptive and expressive literacy, and it has to rest on a solid theoretical foundation.

What Counts as Literacy?

I have always been puzzled by the terminology used to define and describe what counts as literacy. Of course, it doesn't help matters when the world's most respected professional organization devoted to literacy is called the International Reading Association (IRA), and my own department at the University at Albany is called the Reading Department. Further, the terms *English/language arts*, and *reading/language arts* are still in common use, seemingly to distinguish between *English*, *reading*, and *language arts*. Throw in *language* and *literacy*, and no wonder there's confusion!

For early childhood educators, especially, the term *language* refers to listening and speaking and often is distinguished from *literacy* by thinking about these as prerequisites for reading and writing. *English* is traditionally the term used for the study of literature at the secondary level, with *language arts* as an equivalent term for elementary schools. *Reading* typically refers to what teachers emphasize in the very early grades, and the term has also been used in remedial classrooms, as in *remedial reading* or *struggling readers*. Yet the use of the term *reading* definitely implies its greater importance as one of the language arts, which is why I think the term *reading/language arts* is still very common. The problem with adopting the term *literacy* to cover all of these is that for a long time it was associated with adults or with the United Nations, and it was

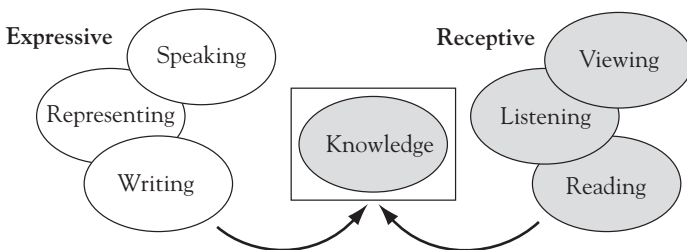
hard to untangle from these connections. Since Marie Clay (Clay 1972) coined the term *emergent literacy* to describe the development of very young children and to replace the outdated term and notion of *reading readiness*, the term *literacy* has become acceptable to encompass all aspects of language arts, even from the very earliest beginnings. And even if the IRA has resisted changing its name (and our department is still called Reading), there's no question that neither is exclusively concerned with reading. So for me, the term *literacy* is the right word to use when we are talking about language, reading, English, or language arts. It covers them all.

I define *literacy* within the two major areas of receptive and expressive literacy. *Receptive literacy* is all about understanding "texts" (or utterances, gestures, drawings, and so on) that originate with others and are either read, heard, or viewed. *Expressive literacy* is all about creating and communicating meaning through writing, speaking, and other media (for example, drawing or illustrating, dramatic playacting, making multimedia presentations, modeling, or playing music). No one has to be persuaded that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are important components of language arts, although, traditionally, reading has been considered the most important. Writing is a close second; speaking and listening trail behind; viewing and representing are barely represented.

See Exhibit 1.2 for a graphical representation of my definition of literacy.

For a decade or so, starting in the mid-1980s, the Whole Language movement gave reading, writing, speaking, and listening

Exhibit 1.2. What Is Literacy?



much more equitable attention (Harste, Short et al. 1987). It also emphasized the notion of literary understanding (as opposed to just reading comprehension) in the early grades—an aspect of literacy that traditionally had largely been confined to the middle and high school. Since the late 1990s, and especially with the passage of No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, reading has again been thrust into the foreground, with decoding given a prominence it hasn't had in decades.

One of the purposes of this book is to advocate a return to a more balanced and inclusive definition of *literacy* and *language arts*.

Viewing and representing have never been major components of the nation's public schools, but they have been elsewhere, and they are both included in the joint professional standards of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the IRA. For example:

- Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world. . . .
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

I also learned recently that viewing and representing have been components of Canada's definition of literacy since at least the 1950s. Viewing and "presenting" (that's what New Zealanders call representing) are components of New Zealand's definition, too.

There are persuasive arguments for including viewing and representing in a definition of language arts. One is that very young children initially acquire what they know about the world through viewing and listening, prior to making sense of it through reading. Similarly, they communicate with the world through representations (gestures, facial expressions, cries, laughter, movements) and speaking, prior to their ability to write. Reading has its origins in viewing; writing originates in other forms of representation.

Another is that literacy in the real world has become more visual in the past twenty years, with the advent of the Internet and with the creation of tools such as desktop publishing that put representational skills into the hands of ordinary people. Who, twenty years ago, would have thought that an ordinary mortal, with no more than simple computer skills, could take digital photographs at a wedding, remove all the red spots, crop the pictures, and within an hour or so have them up on a Web site for all to see?

It's interesting, too, to see how important representation is in the "real" world outside of school. You see this every day in newspapers, magazines, and in Web sites. It is especially evident in museums, where a great deal of thought goes into sharing discoveries or conveying knowledge in ways that challenge viewers to examine them from different—and often conflicting—perspectives.

It's no secret that literacy is shedding its preoccupation with text as it dons increasingly digital clothing. Distasteful as this might be to educators and parents wedded to a textual definition of literacy, the world that awaits our current elementary and secondary students both demands and rewards those who can make sense of what they see, as well as read, and can express themselves in a variety of media, not just in writing and in speech.

For these reasons, I argue that receptive literacy should include reading, listening, and *viewing* and that expressive literacy should include writing, speaking, and *representing*. Of course, reading is a form of viewing, but viewing encompasses much more than reading. Similarly, writing is a form of representation, but writing is only one of many ways to represent what one wants to share with others.

How Do the Components of Literacy Interact?

At the heart of this framework is what's called the *communication triangle*, the origins of which can be found in Aristotle and which forms the foundation for the literacy field (Kinneavy 1970). Simply stated, the communication triangle represents the basic relationships among those who *create and express ideas* (writers, speakers, representers), those who *receive and make sense* of them

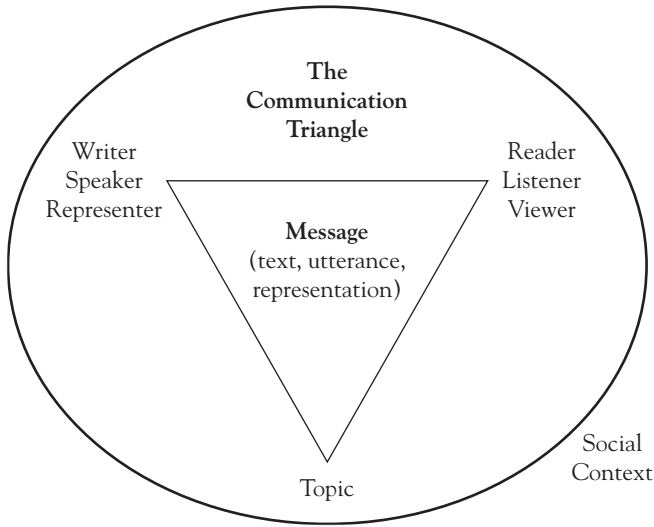
(readers, listeners, and viewers), the *topics or ideas* themselves, and the *actual text* (or utterance, or representation). All of these interactions lie within a social context that influences—in some cases, controls—these interactions.

But the communication triangle doesn't simply describe the players. It also suggests how they can—and should—interact in ways that support growth in expressive and receptive language. Moffett, for example, in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Moffett 1967), argues that a writer (or speaker, or representer, for that matter) develops greater control of writing through written compositions that put increasing distance between the writer and audience, have different purposes (for example, expressive, informational, persuasive), range across a variety of topics, and require increasing control of style and language. Similarly, readers (or listeners, or viewers) develop greater understanding through engagement with texts (utterances, non-print material) that range across topics and purposes and represent increasing complexity of ideas and syntax.

See Exhibit 1.3 for a graphical representation of the *communication triangle*.

More recently, the notion of a social context surrounding all communicative acts has made us realize that certain conventions define and constrain the kinds of communications that typically occur, the ways that language is used, and what counts as appropriate or correct. Thus within the social context of a home, language that's informal and assumes a great amount of shared knowledge is appropriate. However, within the social context of a school, language that's more formal and has to abide by the conventions of school or a state's academic discourse is expected. These conventions vary from one content area or grade to another, but they are different from what's typical at home and what's expected in other social contexts, such as in college or in business.

One way to illustrate how the social context works is to see it in action. Almost every American child has, at some point in upper-elementary school, done the “peanut-butter-and-jelly” exercise. It seems to be a rite of passage. Unless a child has just stepped off a plane from England, he or she already knows what

Exhibit 1.3. Components of Literacy.

a PBJ looks like and almost certainly knows how to construct one. But no matter—this exercise is to explain, precisely, how to make a PBJ and then have a classmate carry out the instructions. The recipient of the instructions typically fails, because the instruction giver has omitted some essential step (for example, forgetting to take the bread out of the plastic wrapping or not opening the drawer to select a knife). Although it’s a fun activity, it’s also a sober reminder of the social context at work. In the real world of home, there are so many shared understandings about everyday kitchen objects and groceries that giving instructions for making a PBJ doesn’t need to include things like taking the bread out of the wrapper or opening a kitchen drawer to pick out a knife to spread the PB and J. It’s precisely *because* children know this familiar social context that when asked to supply precise instructions, they omit the obvious while focusing on the essentials. So the child who describes the process appropriately (“you take two slices of bread, and on one slice spread some peanut butter, and on the other spread your favorite jam, and then slap the two together”) is penalized, while the one who fully understands the literalness

of the task starts by describing in excruciating detail how to extract the bread from its wrapper and the knife from the kitchen drawer gets to be the Student of the Week.

More seriously, the social context constantly defines and redefines the content and form of communicative engagement, and it requires students to be flexible and adaptable, as one context insists on Modern Languages Association (MLA) as the basis for bibliographies, while another requires the American Psychological Association (APA). From adhering to the format of a friendly letter in second grade, to creating a PowerPoint presentation in twelfth grade, to writing a college research paper, and eventually preparing a report for an advertising agency, or even designing an exhibit in a major museum, the social context frames what's acceptable in terms of content, style and language, and format. Thus although a graduate student *could* submit a term paper in the form of a friendly letter, that's not likely to be acceptable. Conversely, giving an academic talk in a gathering of lay folk doesn't work, either. I once attended an amateur society devoted to a regional author in England, only to find half the audience falling asleep as they tried to listen to an overly academic talk on the writer's style. The identical talk in a university setting would surely not have met the same fate.

Learning what is acceptable is very much part of becoming a successful language user. However, what's acceptable depends on the context, and it changes over time, so good readers and writers need to be adaptable, too. In other words, there's a constant interplay between literacy practices themselves and the social context in which literacy practices occur. For example, although many traditional educators rail against the use of abbreviations (for example, LOL for Laugh Out Loud) in instant messaging, the abbreviations themselves have their origins in painfully manipulating tiny buttons on a cell phone to create text. Changes in typesetting and advances in graphic design have seriously challenged traditional ways of writing business letters so that what children are taught in school is often completely anachronistic.

Of course, the social context doesn't merely define "acceptable" discourse; it also privileges particular ways of engaging in literacy and demeans or discourages other ways. So the notion that the social context is benign has to be constantly challenged and guarded against—a topic I'll return to in Chapter Two.

Elements of the Framework

The framework comprises five major elements: (1) *literacy attributes*, which represent the common set of language arts expectations, preschool through grade 12; (2) *non-negotiable instructional contributions and instructional activities* in regular classrooms and support programs; (3) *assessments* that keep track of students' progress toward the attributes; (4) *reports* that communicate progress to parents, schools, and community, and (5) *analysis of data* to inform and improve instruction. In the sections that follow, I'll briefly explain each of the components.

Literacy Attributes

Attributes represent what we want a student to know, do, understand, and have experienced in language arts. Attributes include literacy skills (for example, strategies for figuring out unknown words), but they also embrace literacy practices such as reading widely. Attributes, as I define them, are the most important characteristics of an accomplished literate person in the twenty-first century—someone we would regard as proficient as a reader, writer, speaker, listener, viewer, and representer; with extensive background knowledge; and one who practices literacy, rather than just knowing how to.

Literacy attributes come from several sources:

- Professional standards (for example, NCTE, IRA, and the NAEYC, or the National Association for the Education of Young Children)

- State English/Language Arts Standards and assessments
- Professional and research literature in the literacy field
- Literacy expectations of teachers, specialists, administrators, parents, and members of the school community

Attributes represent what we want a student to be able to do and to have experienced across the grades, so they are different from the traditional listing of language arts skills at each grade level. There are serious problems with these traditional grade-level skills.

First, listing them by grade level, especially in terms of mastery, wrongly assumes that literacy learning progresses by the calendar.

Second, there's more to literacy development than the acquisition of skills. For example, consider the attribute "reads widely." Reading widely is not a literacy skill. It's a literacy experience. Yet it is both a critical contributor to literacy skills and an important goal of learning to read. By focusing on skills (and far too many of them—in my children's elementary school, there were typically 200–300 skills listed per grade level), important aspects of language arts are given short shrift.

Third, if skills are listed by grade level, there's a tendency to create new skills at different grade levels, if only to differentiate among the grades. For example, the difference between understanding informational text in grade 1 and grade 12 is that the informational text itself becomes conceptually and syntactically more dense. The actual strategies needed to make sense of text remain constant. Making text-to-text or text-to-self connections works just as effectively in kindergarten as in secondary school.

An attribute approach differs in several important ways. First, it lists only the few, really important literacy expectations. Very few teachers can (or do) keep 200–300 skills in their head while teaching a grade level. But they can keep 10–15 critical expectations in mind. By "tucking in" the smaller skills and expectations underneath the attributes, not only does the list become more manageable; it also ensures that what's critical is on top, while the supporting details

are folded underneath. This helps everyone focus on what matters, and it ensures that the language arts curriculum doesn't substitute smaller for larger goals, trivial ones for those more important.

Second, attributes reflect our expectations for students across a significant time period (preschool through grade 12, at least), so they aren't listed by grade level. This has both an upside and a downside. The upside is that we are freed from the constraint of having to lay out an entire set of expectations for each grade level. By doing this, we avoid creating artificial distinctions between, say, reading comprehension strategies at different grade levels. More important, we can maintain a consistent focus on the few critical expectations across the grades.

However, the biggest advantage of this approach is that it doesn't assume or require that students acquire literacy attributes on a chronological schedule. So a child age three who reads fluently doesn't have to be put on hold until second grade. He can simply progress to other literacy attributes. Similarly, a student who is in seventh grade but cannot read fluently still has that as an expectation, despite her age and grade placement. The downside is that some of the attributes are not suitable for students in particular grade levels, either because they can only be acquired by very few children or because they no longer apply to the vast majority. For example, the attribute "reads fluently" would not be appropriate as an expectation for all but a handful of three- or four-year-olds; conversely, it wouldn't be appropriate for almost all students beyond grade 3 who can read fluently. (Of course, it depends on how "reads fluently" is defined. I'll get to that presently.) Most attributes, however, will apply equally to preschoolers and secondary students, provided that they are qualified by the expression *appropriate*—appropriate with respect to the conceptual density of the content or the complexity of the form, or both. Also, once one of these attributes has been acquired, it can be dropped as an expectation for individual students. This notion will become clearer, as I explain the concept of instructional contributions and especially so when I get to assessment.

Third, attributes are expressed in plain, simple, language so that everyone—students, parents, educators, and the lay public—can relate to them. This isn't an easy task, but it's necessary. "Demonstrates awareness of the alphabetic principle" typically wouldn't be an attribute, partly because it's too specific (it needs to be tucked inside "reads fluently" or "decodes fluently") but also because it's too technical.

Fourth, attributes are intended to represent language arts expectations not just for school but also for life-long learning, critical thinking, and informed, active participation in our American democracy, as well as in a global economy. A child who is currently in kindergarten will almost certainly graduate under a different set of state and federal language arts standards than are currently in effect for secondary students. So keeping an eye on the future, especially beyond formal schooling, is an important task in creating expectations. This is not an easy undertaking. I well remember thinking in the 1980s that the Internet, at that time a clumsy and hugely difficult mechanism for communicating between universities, would ultimately go nowhere. It never occurred to me then that it would transform almost every aspect of communication, let alone broaden the very definition of literacy.

Finally, while meeting or exceeding standards on state examinations is a very important goal for school literacy, the attributes go much further than that. Students who possess the attributes will do well on state examinations, but they will also be well equipped for the literacy challenges of work, careers, and life.

Non-Negotiable Instructional Contributions

All the years I have been observing and working in public school classrooms have made me realize that what most students do across the grade levels is engage in a series of yearlong "field trips" with teachers, with mini-excursions to specialists, depending on whether they are academically talented or struggling with basic literacy or numeracy skills. When I use the term *field trip*, what I mean

is that students enter a classroom in September and are taken on an educational journey for a year in the company of a teacher, who has considerable control over where that journey goes, what's included or not included, and whether what's taught builds on what's been done before or relates to what is coming ahead. Sarason (1991) notes how isolated teachers are from one another. They spend much of their days in the company of little people (students), with very little time to interact with other adults. For the same reason, their entire language arts curriculum is often isolated from other grade levels. I frequently hear from teachers that they really know little about what happens in other grades, and sometimes when they talk about other grade levels, I know for a fact that their perceptions are wrong.

The more I delve into this, the more I'm convinced that the field-trip metaphor dominates the thinking and practice of language arts instruction across the grades. Another example: in schools where samples of student work are passed along from grade to grade (these become a storage nightmare by the time they reach middle school!), I find that most teachers want their students' work to be passed on, but they are not particularly interested in what comes to them from previous grades. I've asked teachers about this, and they tell me that (1) they like students to start off with a clean slate, and (2) they don't need anyone else to tell them where a student is; they can tell that within a few days of the student arriving in their class.

I want to propose here that the field-trip metaphor be replaced by the notion of *instructional contributions*, so that instead of a student embarking on what is essentially a grade-level excursion under the guidance and control of a classroom teacher, the year-long experience in language arts is instead a set of instructional contributions toward the acquisition of the literacy attributes.

Definition of Instructional Contributions. Before I go any further, I need to explain what I mean by *instructional contributions*. I mean everything that goes on in classrooms (and what goes on outside it, too, directed or encouraged by teachers) throughout the

school year that supports students' acquisition of the attributes. Contributions include instruction and experiences. By *instruction* I mean teaching skills and strategies—directly or indirectly or in combination; by *experiences*, I mean all the activities that teachers engage students in (for example, independent reading and writing, read-alouds, dramatic play, reader's theater, and field trips). We are currently in a period where direct, explicit instruction is seen by some as the most important element in literacy teaching. I don't doubt the necessity of direct instruction where it's needed and especially when it unlocks literacy difficulties among struggling students. However, the contribution of what Donald Holdaway calls *incidental learning*—learning that occurs along the way, in “teachable moments,” in places and at times when what is learned isn't the focus of instruction, is not to be discounted (Holdaway 1979). Nor is what I call *sustained engagement*, which is what happens when teachers intentionally engage students in appropriate literacy experiences over a long period of time.

One way of characterizing instructional contributions is to differentiate between direct and indirect instruction. But I think a more useful distinction is between what I call *non-negotiable contributions* that represent instruction and experiences that every teacher and specialist must provide all students and *instructional activities* that implement the non-negotiables. The idea is that when each educator implements these non-negotiables, all students will make the best possible progress toward the attributes. The non-negotiable contributions represent the “equal educational opportunities” provided to every student; they employ best practices that come from research, the professional literature, and the collective experience and wisdom of professional educators. Non-negotiables also provide the sustained engagement in core literacy activities needed not only to ensure consistency within and across grades but also to ensure that students have had sufficient exposure to and participation in what they need to become fully literate. I sometimes wonder if students were consistently engaged in literacy activities across a long period of time, whether so many

of them would struggle so much and, consequently, have to receive supplementary support that, ironically, often denies them the very opportunities (like independent reading) they need to overcome their difficulties. In fact, they might need fewer of these engagements in a given grade level, if only more grade levels provided the experiences.

Instructional Activities. *Instructional activities* are ones selected by individual teachers and specialists to implement the non-negotiables and thereby support students' progress toward the attributes. These activities represent the accommodations needed to address the particular strengths and needs of diverse students, as well as put to good use the craft and expertise of individual teachers. They also represent legitimately different instructional methods and materials to achieve common goals. Further, they provide the variety so necessary to motivate students across the years. Has anyone thought about how boring routines become when they are done year in and year out? When journal writing first hit the scene in the early 1980s, it was a refreshing alternative to the teacher-assigned topics of the 1960s and '70s. But soon it spread across elementary schools, and within a few years it wasn't quite so refreshing anymore. Children were ecstatic about journals when they first tried them. Recently, I've heard children groan when asked to get out their journals. I see the same thing happening with Post-it notes to assist children with reading comprehension strategies and with reader's and writer's workshop, especially if the formula for these activities is too rigid, and teachers are compelled to follow strict guidelines. But there's another reason to insist on flexibility of instructional activities while implementing the non-negotiables: it's to preserve and strengthen the professional knowledge of individual teachers.

To briefly describe how this works, let me share an example. "Reads widely" is an attribute; the non-negotiable instructional contributions might include

- Reads aloud frequently, choosing material from a wide range of sources (for example, genre, topic, forms of print).
- Provide regular opportunities, encouragement and support for students to read widely in and out of school.

These are *non-negotiable*. In other words, all teachers would have to read aloud to students, drawing their material from a wide range of sources. They would have to provide regular opportunities, encouragement, and support for students to read widely on their own. Non-negotiables don't specify the titles of books and other materials that make up the wide range of choices; neither do they specify how and when teachers will provide opportunities for students to read widely or the particular techniques needed to guide and support a given student. These are what I call the *instructional activities*. Of course, how negotiable these activities end up being really depends on the district and the school. Many districts are quite fearful that the concept of flexibility in instructional activities leads to teachers simply doing their own thing, yet often these are the very districts that advocate differentiated instruction. I see flexibility as necessary for differentiated instruction, as well as for tapping into teachers' pedagogical strengths. (Ironic, isn't it, that we talk so much about teaching to students' strengths but so rarely encourage teachers to teach from theirs.) So long as the non-negotiables are met, and students are making good progress toward the literacy attributes, no one should fear anarchy in the classroom. I have also noticed in many districts where teachers are required to all use the same commercial programs, there is so much variation that they might as well be doing their own thing.

There is one aspect of the instructional activities that I'll come back to in later chapters but is worth mentioning here. There is some merit in teachers within and across grade levels coming to consensus on some activities, where it can be shown that students profit from sustained exposure to specific teaching and learning techniques. One example might be to agree on using techniques

from *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene and Zimmermann 1997) or *Nonfiction Matters* (Harvey 1998) over several grades, so that children become completely familiar with them. One of my concerns, however, is that not all children will find these techniques effective in developing their own comprehension strategies. The other is that, once instituted, a selected approach becomes hard to dislodge, even in the face of questionable results for some or many of the students.

Organization of Literacy Instruction. The framework recognizes that there are many ways to organize literacy instruction to best meet the attributes. It doesn't advocate any particular curriculum or organizational design, but it strenuously challenges approaches that fail to implement the non-negotiables or ignore any of the attributes.

For example, in a theme-based approach to language arts, students read, write, listen, speak, view, and represent within a content-rich, integrated framework. A genre approach focuses on one genre at a time. A workshop approach emphasizes reading or writing, or a combination of these. All these approaches are supported by this framework. The framework is also neutral with respect to commercial materials. It neither favors nor discourages particular programs, but it does challenge a program that fails to provide appropriate contributions to all of the literacy attributes. In these cases, modifications will be necessary to ensure that the non-negotiables are met. The framework also is neutral with respect to the allocation of time to language arts, as well as to the particular organizational structure of literacy instruction. However, the organization of language arts must allow teachers to fully implement the non-negotiables.

Literacy Across the Curriculum. The question always arises about how much of the contribution to the literacy attributes should be made within English/language arts, and how much from other subject areas. In a self-contained classroom, this is relatively easy to figure out, because the classroom teacher has control over

the entire daily schedule for subjects taught within the classroom. In the upper-elementary, middle, and high schools, the challenge is quite different. Not only is less time available for English/language arts, but subject-area teachers have to cover their content and meet exacting requirements of state examinations. Yet contributions need to be made from across content areas if a student is to be fully literate in them—if they are to read, think, write, and represent like a scientist, mathematician, artist, musician, sports player, or historian; if they are to interpret primary source documents; if they are to acquire the background knowledge needed to make sense of more complex texts.

Traditionally, in the reading field, we have promoted the idea of content-area teachers becoming reading (and more recently, writing) teachers. In fact, in a school I observed recently, the art teacher was complaining that she had to increase the amount of reading and writing and decrease the artwork (“representation”) in order to make this happen. Sad, isn’t it, that the one place where representation in ways other than simply writing can flourish is the very place where it’s being discouraged? Also, the art room might be the one place where a child who struggles with reading and writing can find alternate ways to acquire knowledge and express understanding. I’ve also seen this happening in music. No, content area teachers *shouldn’t* be asked to become language arts specialists; rather, they should make contributions to language arts through deepening and extending students’ understanding of their content, as well as by engaging students in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing that are intimately connected to the content areas.

Instructional Support. In the framework, all instructional support programs (for example, Special Education, Title 1) are aligned to both the attributes and to the regular classroom instructional contributions. However, they will necessarily go beyond regular instruction to ensure that all literacy needs are met. Ensuring that the literacy attributes are the starting and ending point

for both regular instruction and instructional support is a critical requirement of this framework, as *all* students are expected to meet the same high English/Language Arts Standards.

It can be a struggle for schools to align instructional support with regular language arts programs. Part of the challenge is reconciling instructional philosophies. For example, behaviorist, or “bottom-up,” approaches advocated by many special educators don’t easily mix with constructivist approaches favored by many classroom teachers. It’s not easy to align an instructional support program that insists on teaching reading subskills to mastery prior to engaging struggling readers in authentic text—or one that insists on having students master reading skills before engaging them in writing—or teaching them only writing mechanics while ignoring composition.

The situation has become even more complicated since the passage of No Child Left Behind and IDEA2004. These legislative acts not only emphasize reading over all other language arts components; they also emphasize decoding over all other aspects of reading. They also have forced classroom teachers to abandon constructivist teaching methods and replace them with behaviorist pedagogies.

I’ll describe in more detail (see Chapter Four) how I think instructional support programs might best be integrated. Here let me just say that the best instructional support programs start with high-quality instructional contributions in the regular classroom, including targeted, differentiated instruction for struggling students. These contributions will need to be supplemented with additional support, including intensive, one-on-one instruction. But the goals remain the same: all students will acquire the literacy attributes. They may not acquire them at the same pace or in the same way, which is why we will always need instructional support programs. But if the goals are broad enough and accommodate a wide range of aspirations and expectations for what counts as being fully literate, the needs of struggling students will be addressed. Although everyone has jumped on the bandwagon of

“high standards,” if standards are defined too narrowly (for example, primarily academic, or job-related, or just literacy skills), then it will be inappropriate for everyone to be held to them.

Assessments

Several principles guide the literacy assessments in this framework:

- All assessments should relate to and provide information on each student’s progress toward the literacy attributes.
- Assessments should be used primarily to inform and improve instruction.
- Assessments should be economical and, wherever possible, embedded within regular classroom instruction.
- Assessments should draw on observations, conversations, and analysis of samples of literacy behaviors, not just literacy tasks or tests.
- Formal literacy assessments should have best available reliability and validity.

Language arts programs need the best assessments we can find that tell us where our students are relative to the attributes, and this will inevitably mean mixing formal and informal measures, as well as ones that have good psychometric properties, with ones that may be wanting in some of these properties yet still provide useful information. Acknowledging the imperfections of all assessments is important, but this should not deter us from doing our best to say where each student is relative to the literacy attributes, so we can support students’ progress toward them. We need to consider how often to assess students and how best we can integrate assessment with instruction. We also need to use a variety of measures (observation, conversation, formal and informal tasks, analysis of samples) to measure students’ progress and status. Keeping assessments simple, unobtrusive, yet comprehensive and as valid as we can possibly make them is the key here.

Reports

In this framework, the elementary report cards need to provide parents with information about each student's current status in each of the literacy attributes. Report cards, therefore, have to be aligned with the attributes so that students' current status and growth toward them can be communicated. At the middle and secondary levels, reporting progress toward the attributes has to be considered alongside traditional grading practices that are required for college entry, as well as the constraints of class loads (secondary teachers frequently have over one hundred students, compared to twenty-five or so in elementary school). Whether this can best be accomplished through analyzing samples of student work—tasks that tap into different literacy attributes, interims, or self-assessments—remains to be explored.

Analysis of Data

Finally, in this framework, literacy assessment data are gathered across the grades and analyzed to support language arts planning. Two kinds of data are gathered: (1) assessment data that are used to complete the report cards and (2) data from districtwide or state-mandated testing. For example, in the early grades, teachers might be using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to determine each student's reading fluency level, along with measures of phonemic awareness, letter and letter-sound identification, and so on. DRAs chart the progress students are making toward the attribute "decodes fluently." But the same data could be used to assess the contribution of individual aspects of fluency (for example, letter knowledge, phonemic awareness) on students' overall fluency (as measured by the DRA) and also toward reading comprehension. These data could also be analyzed to see which attributes are most highly correlated with meeting standards on state ELA examinations. For example, with students at risk of failure on the state examinations, is instruction and experience in some aspects of reading (for example, understanding big ideas,

reading widely) more effective than instruction or experience in others (for example, “decodes fluently”)? Data can also be used to make programmatic or organizational decisions. If the data from pre-K showed that students were unusually needy in, say, letter knowledge, providing additional support in both pre-K and kindergarten to address this need might be particularly beneficial. It might suggest a temporary reassignment of instructional support staff to support the pre-K and kindergarten teachers. If the data showed that children’s knowledge of poetry was weak, this might point to gaps in teacher knowledge about poetry, which in turn could lead to targeted professional development.

Given a district’s commitment to annual goals for student achievement (albeit focused more on state-mandated tests), these assessments will provide invaluable information on how students are progressing individually and collectively toward the district’s expectations. For example, suppose a district set a goal to improve the amount of independent reading done by students across the grades. Data from random samples of students’ reading logs could be analyzed to provide year-to-year comparisons of the amount (and perhaps type) of reading, to demonstrate progress (or lack of it) toward a stated goal. At the same time, individual student reading logs could be analyzed to determine the amount and kind of independent reading, as well as to use for instructional purposes.

Analyzing data brings us right back to the start of this framework, in that it informs the attributes themselves. Suppose our data show us that students’ speaking and listening abilities make little contribution to state test performance, but they are occupying significant amounts of time and energy across the grades. This might lead us to emphasize these less while increasing time and energy to other aspects. Or we might conclude that although they aren’t helping with test scores, they are contributing toward literacy in the workplace, where spoken interaction is critical. By continually forcing conversations about the various elements of the framework, the school district can adjust to changing literacy

expectations from the state, the workplace, higher education, and society, as well as accommodate shifts in the student population. Gathering and analyzing data can bring clarity and focus to these conversations.

Summary

In summary, this language arts framework provides a consistent set of expectations for literacy from pre-K through grade 12 that supports the acquisition of critical language competencies within and beyond school. It also does the following:

First, it covers all six language arts areas (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing), as well as background knowledge—a critical contributor to literacy development.

Second, it emphasizes the few, essential expectations within each language arts area, as opposed to listing hundreds of detailed skills. This not only provides clarity of expectations; it also allows a district to meet not only the demands of school literacy (especially state examinations) but also the broader aspirations of literacy beyond school.

Third, it connects all aspects of language arts, from the attributes to instructional contributions to assessment and reporting. Analyzing the assessment data informs both instruction and professional development.

Fourth, it changes the way we think about the language arts curriculum, from a set of skills to be taught and mastered at each grade level to an approach in which all grade levels focus on the same literacy expectations, but with age- and grade-appropriate materials and experiences in each classroom.

Fifth, it changes the focus of the language arts curriculum toward what the teacher can do to nurture each student's growth toward the attributes rather than simply teach and assess a grade-level language arts curriculum. This does not imply an individualized curriculum for each child (most of the needed instruction and experiences can be common to all students) but rather a differentiated curriculum, in which the needs of individual children of varying abilities and

experiences are met both in small and large group activities, as well as in one-to-one interactions.

Finally, it changes the definition of *consistency* in language arts from simply a set of shared curriculum materials to a set of shared literacy expectations. In fact, it goes further by articulating a small number of non-negotiable instructional contributions that allow considerable flexibility in the specific teaching and learning experiences in classrooms, yet provide consistency of best practice within and across grade levels.

