# Gathering Information about Children

Obviously we cannot look into children's he directly what each of them knows and is a Instead, we have only the things children say and do as indicatior development and learning. So we assess those things. And we mu them sufficiently to be confident that our picture of the children is

How much assessment information is sufficient will vary d our purpose. To make an everyday classroom decision—the choic lar book, for example—a teacher needs only a general idea of "wh are." She can change direction easily if the book she chooses is ov children's heads.

By contrast, to make an important decision about children education, we should assess using *multiple measures*—meaning tha tion should be gathered from different sources, at different times, settings or contexts, using different recording methods. Our basic assessment captures that need: "Assessment is the process of *gath tion about children from several forms of evidence,* then organizing an that information."

This step (sometimes called *documenting*) of systematically information about what children say and do has two parts. The fi

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choosing a method or approach in order to *find out*. The second is choosing a format or method or tool to *make a record* of what we find.

## Find out

There are five basic ways of gathering information about children to document their development and learning. A full discussion of each way is beyond the scope of this booklet. Each has advantages and challenges; each is suited to some purposes and not others; each has its own tools, proponents, and critics. For more information about them, the FOR MORE INFORMATION section points to some excellent sources.

Assessment that combines the first *three* ways—observing systematically, studying work products, and eliciting responses—is the most widely used and accepted approach for determining what young children know and can do.

### *Observe children systematically*

This kind of observation is not the same as the casual kind that we might do watching children at play in the park.

To observe systematically, we watch and listen attentively as children work, play, and live together. We note their facial expressions, tone of voice, what they say and how they say it, how they move, and how they go about completing tasks and whether they complete them. We observe children alone; we observe them as members of a group. We observe them in spontaneous activities and in tasks or situations we have arranged.

As observers, we cannot take in everything, so we focus: on certain children, certain situations, or certain aspects of a child's development and learning, depending on what we need to find out. At the same time, our lens must be transparent. We must describe exactly what a child says or does, not jump to conclusions about what we think it might mean. "Kimberly hit Stevie when he reached for her blocks" is an observation; "Kimberly is really aggressive" is not.

### *Study children's work products*

During the course of a day, children produce drawings, pair writings, computer printouts, graphs, field notes (in science), cons dramatizations, oral presentations. We call all of these rich sources tion children's **work products.** They reveal a chil vidual "style" and development as they give viv of what a child knows and can do. Children's w can document individual as well as group exper

**work product**—A tangible item from children's work and play that gives evidence of their learning or development.

Two big pluses for busy teachers are that ucts can be put aside to be studied later, away fr bustle of the classroom, and they can be saved a children's learning.

### *Elicit responses from children*

We get clues to children's development and learning when children questions, make requests, give directions, lead discussion tasks, set up equipment in a particular way, provide particular ma conduct short conferences and interviews. First and second grade be able to use short written assignments and tests.

How we frame our interaction with the child or the child's with materials determines what *type of response* we will get. Our ai

#### Think Before You Ask—Selected vs. Constructed Responses

We elicit a *selected response* when we have children choose from among a limited range of options. For example, we might ask a child to "point to the red box" when we show him a red, a yellow, and a blue box.

We elicit a *constructed response* when we have children recall, combine, and apply their knowledge and skills in a response they build from scratch. For example, we might ask the child to name all the things she knows that are red. Often a constructed response generates richer, more complex information for interpretation.

always be to get children to respond in ways that both advance their learning and help us find out what the children have and have not learned. This aim is a fundamental element of authentic performance assessment.

### *Note how children respond to your assistance during instruction*

Sometimes important assessment information is revealed as we are teaching. Keep track of your hints, prompts, and helps that assisted particular children to learn. For example, during a first grade journal writing activity, the teacher found that some children needed only an alphabet chart to start writing; others needed to look at the "word wall"; still others needed help brainstorming ideas.

### *Seek information from other adults*

Insight from family members, fellow teachers, assistants, specialists, and support staff can enlarge and deepen our understanding of the children we work with. Ask for their perspectives. Look in the child's file.

Parents and other family members have known their child longer and more intimately than anyone else, and they may see aspects of that child not revealed at school. In addition, family members are our primary window into a child's home culture and any home-school differences. Fellow teachers and classroom assistants who work with the children in our group may have experiences and insights to add, as will speech and language specialists or others who work with specific children individually.

## Make a record

The second part of documenting is making a record of what we find. We make records for several reasons. No teacher can remember everything she might like to about even one child, let alone 15 or more children. Records remind us as we plan, report to parents, confer with children, or collaborate with colleagues. When someone asks, "How do you know that?" or "What evidence do you have?" we should be able to turn to our **documentation.**

**documentation**—A record made of evidence of what a child or group of children have done or accomplished.

Often teachers devise their own ways of recording, such as cre
form or checklist tailored to their unique needs. Sometimes ready-to-
materials are available; for example, in state, district, and commercial
ment guides.

Most ways of recording that teachers typically use fit into one
types: records that describe, those that count/tally, those that rate/ra
those that are made by the children themselves. Each type of record h
tages and disadvantages that may or may not make it a good choice f
assessment purpose.

## *Records that describe*

*Narrative* records are descriptions of a child, situation, or event
written by you or other adults in your classroom. They will vary in le
in amount of detail. One common type is an *anecdotal* record, in which
teacher records a short description of an incident involving one or sev
children. Here are two examples of anecdotal records:

> 1/22/03—Anjoulie came to school before everyone else. Announced,
> came firster 'n everybody." Went immediately to book area, picked ou
> three new books, and sat on the floor to look at them.

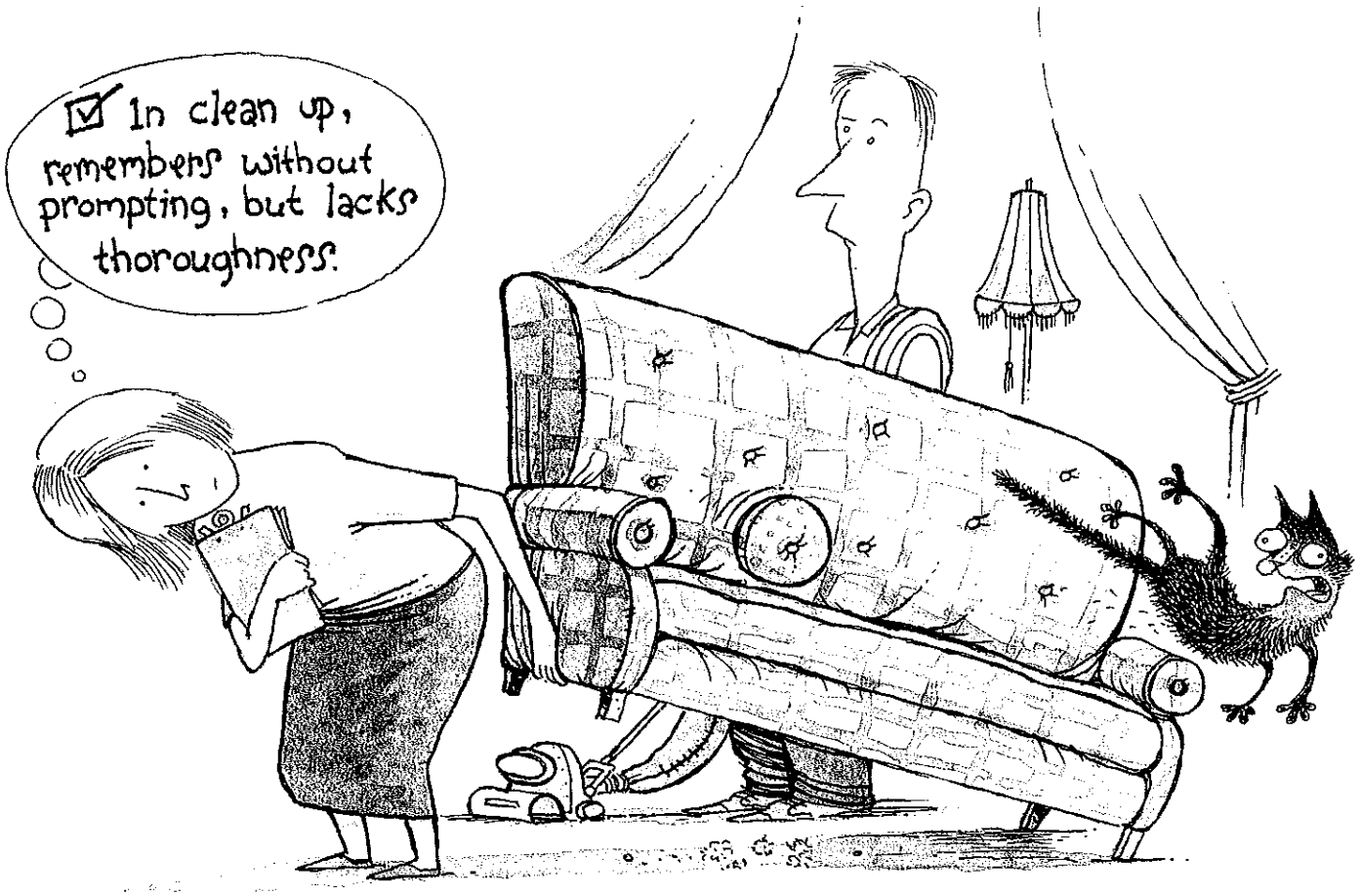
> 3/13/03—Enlisting the aid of Josh and Omar, Dreshawn took charge
> returning all the blocks to their correct places on the shelves. Said, "W
> gonna do it ourselves." When the other boys put blocks in the wrong
> places, D. changed them. "No, they go here." "No, this way." Josh and
> Omar left before finishing. D. put the rest of the blocks away by himse

Another narrative type is short *jottings*, or informative phrases t
add explanation to other kinds of records. For example, in the margin
child's work product or a participation chart, you might jot down:

> Named each object in his drawing.

> Siddeth watched. Did not join in.

Your *diagrams, sketches,* and *photographs* are "visual jottings" and
quick way to preserve important details that would otherwise require e
written descriptions. Properly annotated (with the child's name, date, s
or context of the work, comments about its significance, and other relev


☑ In clean up, remembers without prompting, but lacks thoroughness.

information), such records are a rich source of evidence of child and development. For example, a photograph of a complicated made with cubes can demonstrate that child's recognition of an duplicate and extend patterns. Figure 1 [located at the end of thi provides an example of an annotated photograph.

A *concept map* can document a group's understanding of a problem, or idea at a given point in time. Such a record helps ide various children do and do not understand about the relationshi concepts and what they do or do not know about a topic. Concep take a variety of forms, including lists and webs. Figure 2 provide

*Audiotapes* and *videotapes* can document transient work pro events. Children's discussions, presentations, exhibits, displays, d tions, reading aloud, and oral reporting (e.g., telling about their ir of a science project) all lend themselves to these kinds of records. tape, focus on that element of the children's learning and develop important to preserve because too much material can be overwhel transcribe or analyze later.

## *Records that count or tally*

These records capture information about the occurrence (or a particular behavior or event. How long a child keeps up a particu (its *duration*) can also be recorded.

*Checklists* are one of the most widely used recording methods they are time efficient and can be constructed to capture information anything having to do with children's development and learning. Se endless variations on what to check for and how to mark are possibl lists can display a lot of information about an individual child or a si amount of information about a group of children. Information can be over time, so you do not have to assess everything or every child all Designing the checklist to capture information from several assessme time will document children's progress. Figure 3 shows a checklist.

*Participation charts* can be constructed to show not only which participated in a given activity, for how long, and how often but also

## Looking at the Children as a Group

Teachers plan for individual children, but they also plan for the class as a whole. What experiences would be most beneficial in the coming weeks and months? What changes in the environment should be made? To help address such questions, recording methods that show where the entire group of children stands in relation to a particular goal or developmental accomplishment are efficient. They give you a class profile that shows the range of knowledge and skills in the group—that is, what the most knowledgeable and the least knowledgeable children know, what the most and least proficient can do.

The checklist shown in Figure 3 is an example of such a record. Participation charts can also be constructed to record evidence about a whole group.

Often such assessments reveal groupings or clusters of children who could benefit from similar activities targeting their shared needs. Records that profile all the children are very useful in curriculum planning.

quality of a child's participation. For example, the length of time a child stays focused on an activity provides evidence of her self-regulation and ability to focus attention—skills underlying learning. Charts also can be designed to be filled in by the children themselves. See Figure 4 for a participation chart.

Teachers can use participation charts to study their own behavior, too. Collect the information yourself, or perhaps ask another adult to observe you in action. For example, does the evidence show that you tend to spend disproportionate time with some children or in some areas of the room?

In a *frequency count*, you make a tally mark each time a behavior occurs, documenting the number of occurrences over a defined period. For example, a teacher seeking to foster a rather nonverbal child's language development and use might begin by tallying his verbalizations in different classroom centers and contexts to assess which situations are most likely to promote his expressive language.

### *Records that rate or rank*

These records document our judgments, conclusions, and evaluations of what a child knows and can do by assigning a child's performance a rank or standing on a continuum. The continuum may be based on children's typical development or on a predetermined standard.

Records that rate or rank can document broad judgments or can focus on fine distinctions in the quality of a child's performance. They are often used to document complex behavior such as writing or problem solving. Ratings and rankings should be based on solid evidence, not our impressions or opinions.

With a *rating scale,* we assign the child a rank or rating along a scale (see Figure 5 for an example). In school most of us were graded on a rating scale of A–F. Here are some other widely used rating scales:

Advanced, Proficient, Partially proficient, Needs development

Needs development, Developing, Mastered

Never, Sometimes, Usually, Always

A *rubric* or *scoring guide* provides clear criteria, rules, guidelines, or descriptions by which the child's performance is judged (see Figure 6 for an example of a rubric). Frequently the rubric specifies the conditions under which a child's achievement is to be judged as acceptable—e.g., which or how many criteria must be met or the quality of performance.

### *Records made by children*

Children's *work products* (e.g., their drawings, constructions, oral presentations) are a type of record that children make themselves. Such records are made more meaningful when they include the children's oral comments about their work and your brief description of the context in which the work products were produced.

The same work product can document more than one aspect of a child's development and learning. For example, a kindergartener's journal entry can be used to document the child's developing knowledge of print as well as her interests.

## Choose a procedure

Sometimes the kind of assessment to use is mandated. Sometimes we have more flexibility to create or choose our own, and matching procedure to purpose is always fundamental. Determining the appropriate assessment to use involves some careful thought. Here are some considerations to keep in mind.

**What is being assessed?** A specific behavior or understanding—for example, walking a 6-inch balance beam or identifying letters by name—is discrete enough to record on a checklist. Broad outcome areas—for example, language development, self-regulation, cooperation, and attitudes toward reading or mathematics—call for a more descriptive method (a narrative, for example) or a method that captures the behavior's complexity (maybe a rubric).

**How much detail is needed?** Some methods capture rich, detailed information, and others do not. To document children's progress in understanding story structure, for example, a teacher can gather and examine each child's dictated stories and writing samples, and so on.

**What is practical?** Some records require a lot of classroom time and attention, and teachers' time is finite. Checklists, participation charts, frequency counts, and short anecdotal records, as well as collecting children's work products, are easily worked into classroom routines and can provide much useful information.

**Do you need information on one child or on the group?** Some ways of recording information—group checklists and participation charts, for example—can display an entire group's standing in relation to a desired result. This perspective enables a teacher to think about how to help the entire group advance their learning.

**Are you monitoring progress over time?** If you want to compare a child's behavior over time, use the same type of record and capture the same level of detail each time you assess, so your assessments are comparable. In addition, the way you collect information and the context used should be similar.

**What is your assessment experience and understanding at this time?** Beginning teachers should give themselves time and opportunity to learn by using simple recording techniques at first. Teachers experienced in assessment and in classroom management may be ready to use more demanding recording schemes.

Figure 1. Annotated photograph

**Portfolio Entry Form**

**Child** Nate Curtis **Date** 2/1/92 **Observer** E.B.

**Context/Setting:** Manipulatives; choice time

**Comments/Significance:**

Extend pattern work. Work on words for explanation

Nate worked with the Cuisenaire rods the entire choice time (45 min). Persuaded Angie + Cody, the other 2 children working with C, rods, to let him use all the orange rods. Carefully lined up rods; created AB pattern for most of length. Some trial + error in locating the correct length of shorter rods to equal the orange (10) rod, but not mistakes in final product. Demonstrates knowledge of alternating pattern, concept of "equal in length," + excellent muscle control for 4. Unable to explain why the large number of orange rods on the right, + their absence on the left; unable to articulate pattern even though he had made it. Maintained focus on this self-chosen task. Not seen— social skills of obtaining willing cooperation from peers.

Figure 2. Concept map

Developed during a discussion between a group of 3- and 4-year-olds and their teacher, this concept map shows the children's understandings about "school."

Most of these preschoolers readily gave accurate responses—some in sentences—to what they do and who they see in school. They recognized and responded to all the categories being considered. One child's responses ("marker," "We leaf") were clearly off the mark, alerting the teacher to a possible concern with that child's language and conceptual ability.

Fewer children responded to how they feel at school and what they are learning. If expanding children's understanding of and ability to talk about those more abstract topics is a goal, this quick assessment indicates that the children may need more help.

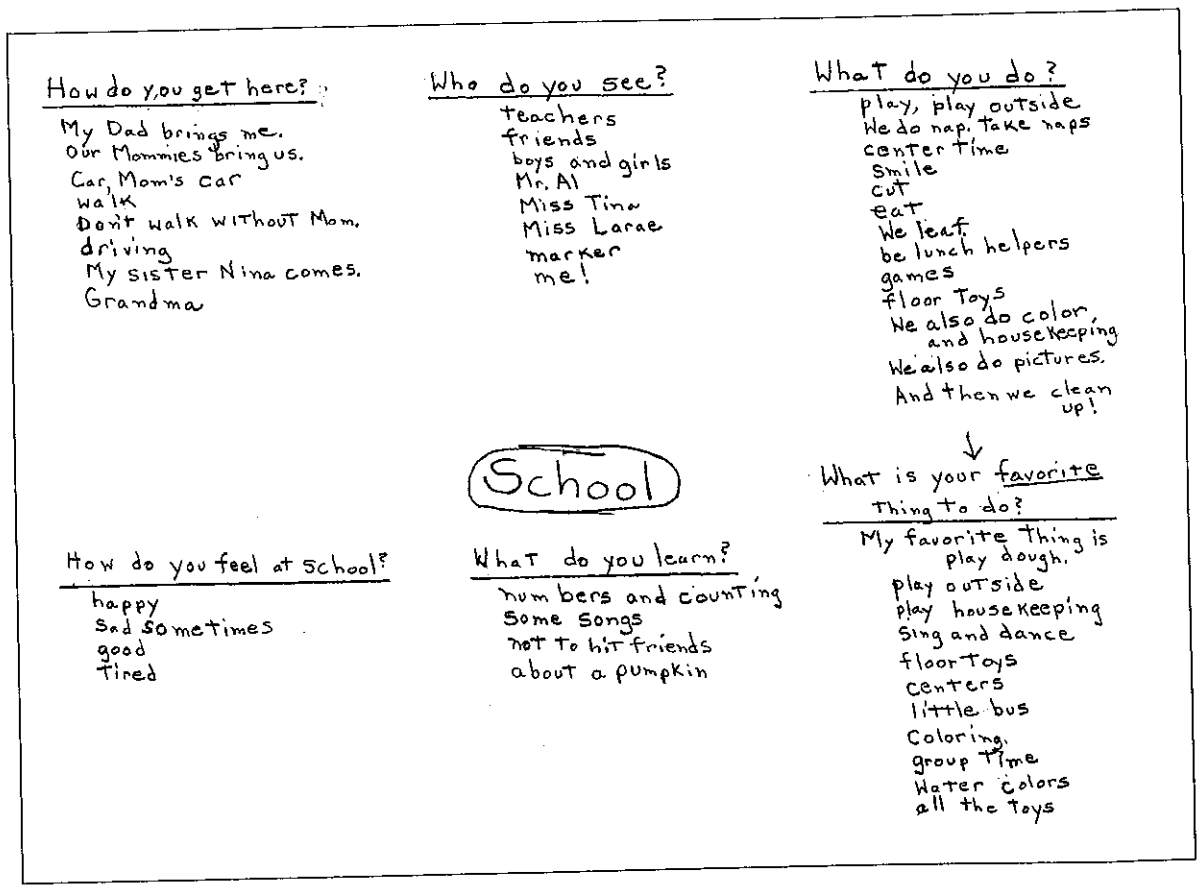


Figure 3. Checklist for assessing a group of children on their literacy skills

**Date:** _____

**Legend**

| | |
|---|---|
| ✔ | Exhibits behavior regularly |
| + | Making progress |
| * | Has not yet exhibited the behavior |

| Names | Identifies facts. | Uses the information to retell what has been read in own words. | Interprets symbols. | Handles books appropriately. | Identifies some print conventions. | Letter | Word | Capital Letter | Period | Identifies some book conventions. | Front cover | Title | Author | Illustrator | Title page | Spine | Demonstrates directionality and return sweep. | Demonstrates matching one spoken word with one written word. |
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Figure 4. Participation chart for a small group discussion

Observer Damien T. (volunteer)

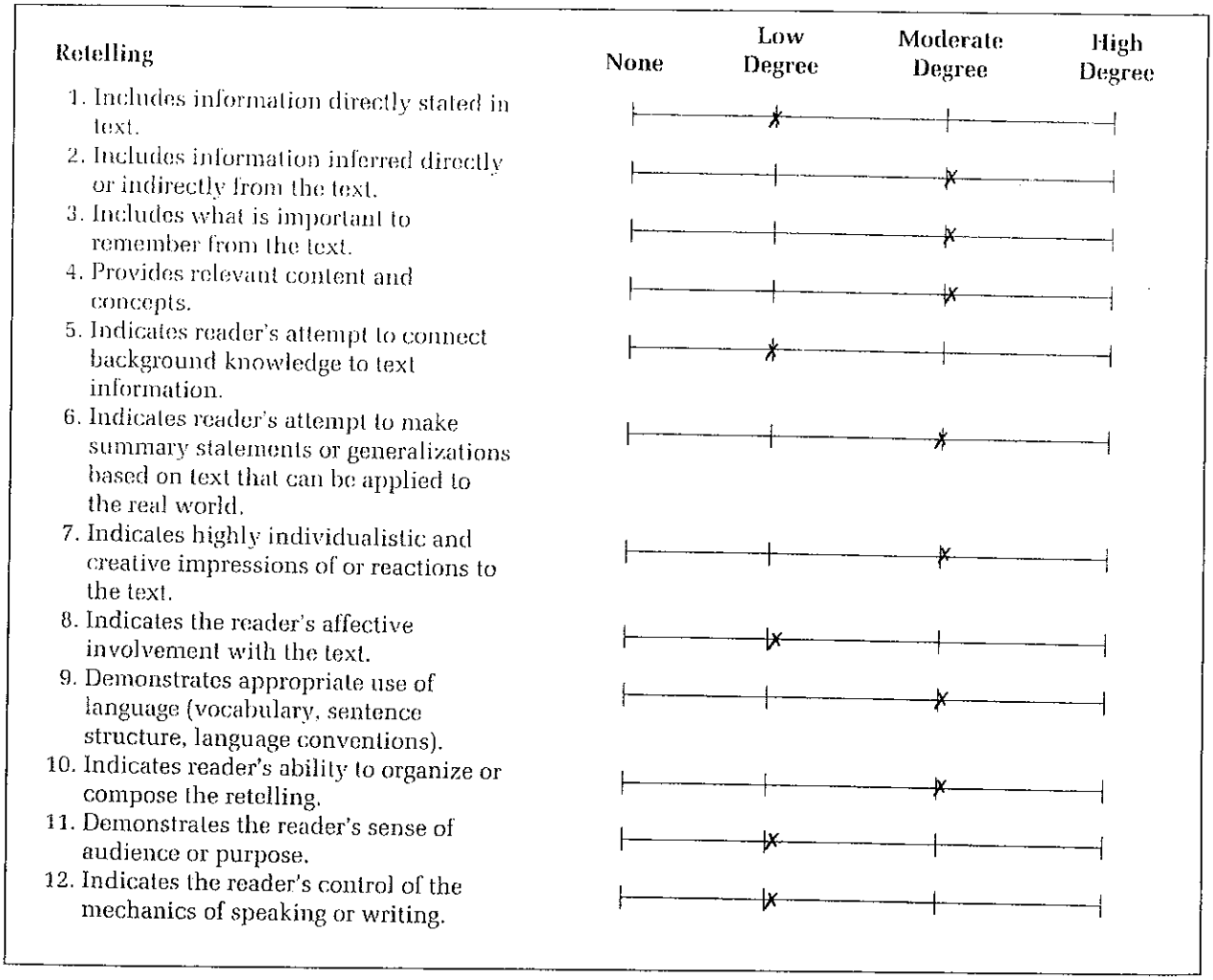
Date 04/15/04

Group AM Kindergarten

| Make a tally mark for each response or request. | Asks question; Makes Request | Responds to Question / Request | Volunteers Information / Comment | Irrelevant Action or Comment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher - Vialfondo, Tila | | | | |
| Amanda, T. | | | | |
| Amned, S. | | | | |
| Emily, L. | | | | |
| Farid, H. | | | | |
| Ryan A. | | | | |
| Sarah, W. | | | | |
| | | | | |

Figure 5. Rating scale

Children are rated on their retelling of a story, as evidence of their skills and understandings in 12 literacy-related areas.




From Morrow, L. 1988. Retelling stories as a diagnostic tool. In S.M. Glazer, L.W. Searfoss, & L.M. Gentile, eds., *Reexamining Reading Diagnosis: New Trends and Procedures*, 128–49. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Reprinted with permission of Lesley M. Morrow and the International Reading Association. 

Figure 6. A rubric for scoring "Expresses Ideas Clearly"

*A. Expresses ideas clearly*

4 Clearly and effectively communicates the main idea or theme and provides support that contains rich, vivid, and powerful detail.

3 Clearly communicates the main idea or theme and provides suitable support and detail.

2 Communicates important information but not a clear theme or overall structure.

1 Communicates information as isolated pieces in a random fashion.

Reprinted from R.J. Marzano, D. Pickering, & J. McTighe, *Assessing Student Outcomes: Performance Assessment Using the Dimensions of Learning Model*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1993, 85. 