



Teachers' classroom assessment practices and fourth-graders' reading literacy achievements: An international study

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H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ Teachers' uses of various types of classroom assessments vary by nation.
- ▶ Teacher assessment & student achievement outcomes vary by nation & reading aspect.
- ▶ Teacher assessment & student sex equity outcomes vary by nation & reading aspect.
- ▶ Teacher assessment & student self-concept outcomes vary by nation & reading aspect.
- ▶ Teacher assessment & student attitudes outcomes vary by nation & reading aspect.

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This study, through multilevel analyses of the data of four English-speaking nations (i.e., Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States) from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2001 database, investigated the relationship between teachers' uses of various types of classroom assessments and their fourth-graders' reading literacy achievement, reading self-concept, and attitudes toward reading. The results showed varied outcomes associated with teachers' uses of different types of assessments (multiple-choice items, short-answer and paragraph writing, and oral communication) across countries and across aspects of student reading achievement. Implication of the study and recommendations for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The methods or types of assessments that teachers apply in their daily classroom instruction, and the manner in which they conduct those assessments can have an influential impact on the learning outcomes of their students. Often argued is that assessment,

especially classroom assessment, when used appropriately, can promote students' learning and improve teachers' instruction (e.g., Stiggins, 2001, 2002).

Some researchers in assessment have argued that performance assessment² (e.g., open-ended problems, essays, hands-on science problems, computer simulations, projects) has advantages over

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² Some researchers (e.g., Herman et al., 1992; Wiggins, 1989) refer to this type of assessment as "alternative assessment" or "authentic assessment." For consistency, we use "performance assessment" or "performance-based assessment" throughout this article. Stiggins and Conklin (1992) define performance assessment as those assessments, in which the teacher observe students in the process of doing things (e.g., speaking or oral reading) or examine products created by students (e.g., writing samples or art projects), and "they differ from multiple-choice or true-false tests in the types of exercises used, mode of responses and scoring procedures, among other things." (p. 220). Although there are variations of definitions regarding performance assessments and connotations may vary across subject areas, according to Herman et al. (1992), this type of assessment has the following characteristics: 1.) ask students to perform, create, produce, or do something, 2.) tap higher-level complex thinking and problem-solving skills, 3.) use tasks that represent meaningful instructional activities, 4.) invoke real-world applications, 5.) require that people, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgment, and 6.) require new instructional and assessment roles for teachers. For references regarding the definition of performance assessment in reading, please see Guthrie, Van Meter, and Mitchell (1994).

traditional assessment (e.g., selected-response, especially, multiple-choice items) (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991; Pierce & O'Malley, 1992; Shepard, 2000; Wiggins, 1989). Advantages summarized by these researchers include that performance assessment measures abilities and skills of wider range and is more aligned with those skills required in the real world. In addition, it is often stated that performance assessments generally tap high-order complex thinking and problem-solving skills and promote in-depth learning (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992).

Hambleton and Murphy (1992) summarized four popular criticisms of traditional tests (selected-response assessments, particularly multiple-choice tests): (a) such tests foster a one-right-answer mentality, (b) they narrow the curriculum, (c) they focus on discrete skills, and (d) they under-represent the performance of lower socio-economic status (SES) examinees. Other authors have criticized multiple-choice tests as assessing isolated bits of information, rules, and procedures and as exercises in detection and selection (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991).

When much of the debate about performance assessments and selected-response assessments occurred in the early 1990s, whole language was the conventional wisdom in reading (Pearson, 2004). Pearson described whole language as being characterized by the principle of authenticity of texts, tasks, and tests and the integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The move to assessing student performance through the use of performance assessments and portfolios appeared to address the whole language principle of authenticity. Reading instruction was moving from a focus on basal readers and skills lessons, accompanied with workbook pages, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and end-of-unit tests (Goetze, Sanders, & Bailey, 2010; Nicholson & Tunmer, 2010), to engaging students with authentic texts, tasks, and assessments. The emphasis was on how students make sense of the text as they read (Taylor, 2007).

Although the forms of assessment provoked much discussion and debate, few studies have empirically investigated the impact of teachers' classroom assessment practices on students' achievement. One exception is a study in the United States conducted by Shepard et al. (1996), in which they introduced performance assessment as a part of participating third grade teachers' regular instruction in reading and mathematics. After a year-long program of introducing performance assessment into classroom instruction, Shepard et al. found no significant difference in reading scores for participating schools between 1992 and 1993 on the Maryland School Performance Assessment reading measure. Nor did the study show significant differences in reading scores for the participating and control schools.

Thus, little research has focused on the relationship between various forms of classroom assessment and student achievement. Even less research has been conducted under cross-national/cultural settings.

1.1. Research questions

In this study of teacher assessment across national settings, we investigated the relationship between teachers' assessment practices and their students' literacy reading achievement in three aspects of scores: (1) reading for literary experience, (2) reading for acquiring and using information, and (3) total or overall reading literacy, which is a composite of the first two aspects of reading achievement (for PIRLS reading literacy construct definitions, see Martin, Mullis, & Kennedy, 2003). The following research questions guided this study.

1. How are teachers' uses of various types of classroom assessments such as multiple-choice items, paper- and pencil-based

- writing, and oral communication related to their fourth-graders' achievement in the three aspects of reading literacy?
2. How are teachers' uses of various types of classroom assessments differentially related to their fourth-graders' reading literacy achievement when student gender is taken into account?
3. What relationships exist between teachers' various uses of classroom assessment activities and their fourth-graders' attitudes toward reading literacy and students' self-concept of ability in reading literacy?

As we examined these questions for each of the four English-speaking nations, these research questions allowed us to examine the similarities and differences that emerged across the four English-speaking nations of Canada, England, New Zealand, and the United States.

1.2. Gender differences in reading achievement and differential impact of teachers' assessment practices on gender group achievement

Our research questions include gender because prior studies related to achievement indicate gender differences exist in reading. For example, on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an assessment of 15 year old students' development of skills for adult life, in the 2000 administration females performed better on reading literacy than males for all participating countries (Shiel & Cosgrove, 2005). This finding in gender difference in reading performance is consistent with the results from PIRLS 2001 and 2006 studies, in which the fourth-grade students from 35 nations and 40 nations participated, respectively (Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez, & Kennedy, 2003; Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007).

Although the majority of past studies on gender differences in reading achievement within and across countries support the claim that that females consistently outperform males in reading achievement, regardless of the age of the students, according to various research studies (see a synthesis by Bond & Dykstra, 1997; also, Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue; 1999; Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Mullis et al., 2003, 2007), some researchers noted that this gender difference pattern in reading literacy might be country specific (Johnson, 1972; Shiel & Cosgrove, 2005; Yarborough & Johnson, 1980). For example, in a cross-national study of gender differences in reading in Canada, England, Nigeria, and the United States, Johnson (1972) found that females in Canada and the United States significantly outscored their male peers. However, Johnson reported that males in England and Nigeria significantly outperformed their female counterparts in reading achievement. Thus, findings related to gender and reading may not generalize across all countries.

Though much attention has been given to the students' differential gender achievement performance, few studies have appeared to explore the possible differential impact of teachers' various classroom assessment practices on student achievement by gender. The intent of this paper is to provide some preliminary findings in this aspect of achievement and classroom assessment in cross-national settings.

1.3. Reading self-concept and reading attitudes and gender difference in reading achievement

Numerous studies in reading research have reported strong associations between students' motivational factors, such as reading attitudes, self-efficacy in reading, self-concept/self-perception of reading ability, and reading achievement in relation to differential gender performance in reading (e.g., Byrne, 1986;

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