5

Assessing Reading Performance and Students' Funds of Knowledge

FOCAL POINTS

1. Traditional ELA reading assessments are important—but insufficient for helping marginalized readers succeed.
2. Teachers need to assess both what students already know and what they do outside of school in order to make classroom work most relevant.
3. Teachers can cover academic content and meet standards better by connecting instruction to students' own funds of knowledge.
4. Assessing students' funds of knowledge enhances but does not replace academic instruction and testing.

So far in our discussion of teaching marginalized readers in middle school English language arts, we have noted that students come to school with considerable prior knowledge about how texts work and that many students labeled as "struggling" are actually active readers outside of school. By understanding students' general knowledge and their reading of texts outside of school, middle school English teachers can create a kind of "third space" (Guitiérrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004) in classrooms where students use their funds of knowledge to learn disciplinary content and practices (Moje, 2008). When teachers systematically link curriculum with texts and knowledge from students' lives beyond school, they can reposition formerly marginalized students to become possible or primary knowers (Aukerman, 2007) who become central to their

own learning and participate more fully than they were when labeled as "struggling." When they are supported in such environments by implementing the engagement perspective described in Chapter 4 (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2001), marginalized readers become more likely to develop positive motivations, improve their reading skills, and engage in ways positively correlated with increased reading achievement. This whole process begins with the fundamental act of assessment.

In this chapter we discuss how assessing each individual student's funds of knowledge is the first step in positioning middle grade readers for success in English. We begin with a discussion of traditional assessments used in middle grade classrooms and review reading assessment standards. Next we describe an approach to reading assessment in which teachers use data about students' funds of knowledge to choose texts and methods that address the ELA curriculum while also meeting the needs of marginalized readers. We conclude with a discussion of how this alternative approach to assessment repositions formerly struggling readers in more positive ways and actually supports teachers in meeting state and national test standards.

TRADITIONAL READING ASSESSMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Countless textbooks offer reading teachers the formulas and techniques associated with traditional reading assessments. Like most professional educators, we believe the assessment of students' prior knowledge of academic concepts, ongoing learning, and periodic evaluation should influence curriculum development and inform instructional practices. Assessment is the systematic collection and analysis of data before, during, and after a learning episode, in which information is used by teachers to evaluate instruction, provide feedback for learners about their progress, and analyze the overall nature of teaching and learning during a given time period in a particular place.

Assessment data are referred to as *formative* when they are used to document and revise the teaching and learning process. Data become *summative* when they are used to evaluate or otherwise rank the quality of teaching and/or learning during a specific time span. Whether formative or summative, assessment data are primarily intended to generate a context for teaching and learning that guides future activity. As such, we consider all assessment to be formative and meant primarily to support student and teacher success rather than primarily to test them, especially as applied to educating marginalized readers.

A review of literacy research and scholarship reveals very little spe-

cific information about particular assessments or systems for secondary-level reading education. Many studies and discussions refer to standardized reading tests and their positive and/or negative effects on teaching and learning (Guthrie, 2002; Johnston & Costello, 2005; Lee, 1998). Others discuss the validity or reliability of such tests for understanding patterns in student learning or policy reform (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, l991; Sarroub & Pearson, 1998; Thomas & Oldfather, 1997). But most resources discuss traditional approaches that are likely already familiar to middle school English teachers.

Examples of traditional reading assessments, for example, include but are not limited to criterion-referenced tests (standardized tests that assess individual students' recall and application of specific content knowledge and skills) and norm-referenced tests (standardized tests that compare students' relative abilities in a particular skill or subject, based on statistical averages for their age group, grade level, gender, race, etc.). Criterion- and norm-referenced tests are typically administered only at the state and national level. But the majority of reading assessments in US middle schools are teacher-made (Ornstein, Lasley, & Mindes, 2005). For example, teachers create multiple-choice and short-answer quizzes to assess students' literal comprehension of texts they read, as well as matching and true-or-false tests. They create essay prompts that require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate their reading in ways that are believed to reflect higher-level thinking skills, or they use similar assessments offered in standardized textbooks.

While such quizzes and tests are frequently used as summative assessments of students' understanding, teachers also employ assessments to guide their use of instructional materials during the process of teaching and learning. For example, teachers may employ various formulas to make sure the texts they use are appropriate for a certain grade level, or they may use cloze tests to assess students' general ability to read or their readiness to engage with more complex material.

Less formally, teachers assess middle school readers during instructional units by observing patterns of behavior across classes and grade levels. According to Roe and Smith (2005), such observations include monitoring student discussions about reading, analyzing anecdotal notes from teacher–student conferences to document whether and how students use reading strategies, documenting students' abilities to retell and summarize information from readings, and using checklists and rating scales to document growth in fluency and vocabulary. In some states and schools, teachers also analyze portfolios in which students collect and describe documentation of their individual progress as readers over time. All together, these assessments can be used to establish measurable goals

for reading instruction and to generate data about whether or not students attain those goals.

All of the assessments noted above are widely described in most textbooks about reading instruction. In today's climate of testing and accountability in education, they are frequently required and implemented as a matter of routine in middle schools across the United States. Because of their prominence, we choose only to mention them in passing here, the assumption being that practically all middle school English teachers already use them. There is an additional type of assessment that is too often missing from middle school reading instruction that would make traditional assessments more productive, namely a basic assessment of students' individual fund of knowledge from outside of school.

Our approach reflects the Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing set forth by the International Reading Association (IRA; 2009). IRA's standards stipulate that students' interests should come first in any assessment (standard 1). Starting with assessment of one's own funds of knowledge reflects the fact that teachers are the most important actors in assessment (standard 2) and that students, their families, and their local community conditions all play significant roles in both designing and applying assessments (standards 1, 5, 8, 9, 10, and 11). While IRA notes (and we agree) that traditional assessments are important for accountability, the standards also stress that the primary purpose of assessment is to *improve* teaching and learning, *not* merely to document or evaluate them (standard 3). That primary purpose of continuous improvement requires us as teachers to think critically about how assessment drives curriculum and instruction (standard 4). It requires us to make sure assessments are fair and equitable for our students (standard 6), and it requires us to change them when they are not (standard 7). Assessing individual students' funds of knowledge enables teachers to meet IRA's rigorous standards in ways that support *all* students, especially marginalized readers, as they learn to read and succeed in school.

WHY ASSESS STUDENTS' FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE?

Because summative testing and evaluation are by far the most common types of assessment used in schools today, many teachers might reasonably ask why they should spend time documenting students' funds of knowledge gained *outside* of school when both the students and teachers will be held accountable most for the knowledge gained *inside* the school. Actually, in truth, starting the reading assessment process with data collection about students' knowledge, interests, experiences, and the use of

texts beyond school is really a way to make traditional assessments *more* effective.

Learning to assess and use each student's funds of knowledge is not intended to replace traditional reading assessment. It *enhances* assessment in ways that scientists have established are basic to valid and reliable testing. As Johnston and Costello (2005) note, "Assessment is a social practice that involves noticing, representing, and responding to children's literate behaviors, rendering them meaningful for particular purposes and audiences" (p. 258). In support of this perspective, Johnston and Costello point out that all assessment "should be grounded in current understandings of literacy and society" (p. 256). The most profound implication of grounding assessment in the *current* understandings of literacy and society is that traditional academic texts used for teaching youth to read are in many ways out of date when used on their own. They can only be made useful if teachers have the data needed to link those traditional texts with students' current knowledge and daily experiences.

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Saying that traditional texts and assessments are insufficient is not to say that they totally lack value; on the contrary, traditional texts and assessments *can and should* be used in schools. They can be useful in helping students learn important concepts, skills, and cultural capital they need for participation in 21st-century society. But traditional assessments and the curricula they reflect are unlikely to be *sufficient* for 21st-century students—especially marginalized readers. As Moje et al. (2004) point out, traditional academic texts can get in the way of students learning how to participate, understand, and communicate in the ways we value most for classroom work. Thomas and Oldfather (1997) point out that the ways we assess students send important messages about how we see them as people. When we offer 21st-century students texts and tests that ignore, discount, or subordinate their own interests, practices, and experiences in favor of testing them for their familiarity with academic texts selected without their input or consideration, we literally position those readers for failure in spite of our intention to help them.

By starting the reading assessment process with documentation of each student's funds of knowledge, teachers can send all students the essential message that their everyday *local* knowledge and uses of reading are considered important, valuable, and useful in ultimately succeeding in the discipline of English. This acknowledgment can bolster their efficacy as readers, encouraging their academic *resilience*—"a disposition

to focus on learning when the going gets tough, to quickly recover from setbacks, and to adapt" (Johnston & Costello, 2005, p. 257). As Johnston and Costello describe it, generating resilience through assessment counteracts the creation of "brittleness" in some students that comes from testing them for mastery in high-stakes environments where the risk of failure leads to avoidance and ego-defensive behavior, both of which negatively correlate with reading achievement (Guthrie et al., 2009).

When marginalized readers are supported in both learning and practicing English language arts via tasks and texts they find meaningful and authentic, they perform differently and usually more successfully. Traditional assessments typically presume that performance of a skill or application of a concept in one context can reliably represent that individual's knowledge and ability in all contexts, but that is not necessarily true (Johnston & Costello, 2005). Young people often treat knowledge from other parts of their lives as distinctly different from school knowledge. As a result, they don't always see their existing skills and knowledge as highly relevant to academic learning (Moje et al., 2004).

By documenting their knowledge and skills and then using that data to help students see how their own experiences connect with disciplinary knowledge, teachers can take the first step in positioning formerly marginalized readers as primary knowers. These marginalized readers' understandings of and experience with texts, structures, genres, and concepts from film, television, magazines, multimedia, and other texts they read every day are both highly relevant and useful in ELA classes. Their newly acknowledged literacies can become central to their ultimate understanding academic practices and disciplinary knowledge (Monnin, 2009).

ASSESSING STUDENTS' FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE: A PROTOCOL

In their research about the nature of students' knowledge outside of school, Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) and Moje et al. (2004) have attempted to devise comprehensive categories for the various types of knowledge ("funds") that children bring with them to school. The goal of their research is to systematically consider how educators can use such knowledge to design curriculum and instruction that responds to students' needs in local communities while also helping them succeed in the current U.S. system of educational accountability.

Students' various funds of knowledge come from many sources, and knowledge may cross categories or overlap contexts. In this section we offer a protocol—a systematic process—for asking questions and documenting the kinds of knowledge, skills, interests, activities, and texts that

middle school readers engage with in their everyday lives. Our categories and questions are derived from research on these funds of knowledge, reading motivation, and scholarship about authentic assessment (Friese, Alvermann, Parkes, & Rezak, 2008; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Moje et al., 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007). It is important to emphasize that our protocol is intended as a model rather than a recipe for assessing students. It is not intended to provide a laundry list of questions to ask all students everywhere in exactly the same way. Teachers working with diverse children across different classrooms and communities can and should modify categories and questions, depending on their particular contexts. Questions should also be rephrased as appropriate in ways that young adults can understand and respond to easily.

One of the great challenges noted in research about students' various funds of knowledge is the practical impossibility of teachers visiting the homes of all their students, gaining full access to their communities, and talking with all of the individuals or documenting all of the activities that inform those students' understanding and experience. Such in-depth assessment is all but impossible. However, individual teachers (and certainly groups of teachers at the departmental or school level) can collect data by simply interviewing students in their classroom and asking them to respond directly to questions about their activities and reading practices outside of school. These questions need not be overly intrusive. They can be asked and discussed in class through conversation as teachers demonstrate genuine interest in their students' lives. In fact, teachers can explain that they are interested in learning these things about students' lives specifically because doing so will help them make sure students get what they need to succeed, and that the information will be used to make school more relevant and accessible to everyone.

The following set of figures offers five categories and sets of questions any classroom teacher can use or adapt to assess students' funds of knowledge and thereby make more responsive decisions about curriculum and instruction. Figure 5.1 includes questions in the category of Family and Home Life Funds, Figure 5.2 includes questions in the category of Community Funds, and Figure 5.3 the category of Personal Activity Funds. Figure 5.4 includes questions in the category of Popular Culture Funds, and Figure 5.5 the category of General Knowledge/Current Events Funds.

By asking students about their family structures, relationships, working lives, domestic activities, and household routines or traditions, teachers gain data about students' funds of knowledge as areas of skill and interest, vocabularies, and norms for social interaction that may vary by culture and social class. Similarly, by asking them about their neighborhoods and communities, teachers gain data about students' languages,

1. Describe your family.
2. Where did your family come from? What do these origins mean to you and your family?
3. Do you have any brothers or sisters? How old are they? How would you describe your relationships with them?
4. Describe your parents.
5. Do you have other relatives you are close to? Where are they? How are they important to you?
6. What do you talk about with your family when you are together?
7. What kinds of things do you do with your family when you are together?
8. What are your roles in your family?
9. What traditions does your family have? What do these traditions mean to you?
10. What things do you believe your family values most? What do these values mean to you?
11. What kinds of chores do you and your family members do at home?
12. What kinds of work do you see your mother doing? How do you help her?
13. What kinds of work do you see your father doing? How do you help him?
14. Do you work outside of your home and school? What kinds of work do you know how to do?
15. Do your brothers and sisters work outside of home or school? If so, what do you know about the work they do?
16. What kinds of reading and writing do your family members and you do? Do members of your family read or write for pleasure and work? Do you?
17. How do you think your family has affected who you are as a person?
18. Does your family have any special goals or expectations for what you do, how you behave, or who you will become? If so, how do you feel about these goals and expectations? Why?
19. What goals do you have for yourself in life?

FIGURE 5.1. Family and home life funds of knowledge.

expectations and understanding of social interaction, patterns of activity, consumer knowledge and values, communication styles, and even schedules (Moll et al., 1992). Asking students what they read and why they read it (or not) most obviously helps teachers understand how and why a group of students is likely to respond to a text used in the classroom (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Teachers can then use the data to select texts more strategically, adapt instructional techniques, and teach disciplinary content and processes using scenarios students are more likely to understand and more readily relate to. Similarly, learning more about what a group of students typically knows or believes about interacting with authority figures outside of school can help a teacher make important decisions about what tone to take during class, how to choose language

1. Where do you live? What's it like there? What's the geography like? What kinds of homes do people live in? What do you see every day?
2. How would you describe your neighborhood to someone from a different part of the world?
3. Who lives in your neighborhood? What do you know about them? How do you feel about them?
4. What do you know about the kinds of work people from your neighborhood do?
5. Name the most important or popular places in your community. What meaning do these places have for you?
6. What activities do you participate most in your neighborhood? Why?
7. What do you think are the most important values of people, overall, in your neighborhood? Why?
8. What kinds of organized activities take place in your community? Are there festivals, or sports, or special events that are important? What do these mean to you?
9. In your opinion, what are the most important things you've learned from living in your community? Why are these things meaningful to you?

FIGURE 5.2. Community funds of knowledge.

the students will respond to during instruction, and how to manage and motivate various individuals and groups.

We recognize that middle school students are highly diverse, even within a single supposedly homogeneous classroom. Any single class's answers to these questions are likely to vary a great deal. Perhaps more importantly, some students may feel uncomfortable answering questions about their family and home lives in school. Some students might be

1. When you have free time, how do you spend it? Why?
2. What do you like to do for fun? Why?
3. What kinds of things do you do when you are with friends? Why?
4. What kinds of things do you enjoy doing on your own? Why?
5. What do you look for in a friend?
6. What makes you a good friend?
7. Do you have any hobbies? How did you learn about them? What do they mean to you?
8. Are you involved in any organized activities like sports, theater, dance, music, or arts and crafts? Why?
9. Do you participate in any other organized activities like youth groups, volunteer organizations, church activities, or the like? What do you get out of being a part of these groups?

FIGURE 5.3. Personal activity funds of knowledge.

1. What books have you read recently? Why?
2. What books have you read in your life that were meaningful to you? Why?
3. What's your favorite kind of thing to read? Why?
4. What's a good book or story you read in school recently? What made it stand out for you?
5. What magazines do you read? Why?
6. What are your favorite television shows of all time? Why?
7. What television shows are you watching right now? Why do you like them?
8. What are your favorite movies? Why?
9. What are the best movies you've seen lately? Why did you like them better than others?
10. If you use the Internet, which sites do you visit? Why?
11. What do you use the Internet for most?
12. If you have a computer, what do you use it for most?
13. Do you use email? How often? What do you use email for most? Who do you email? Why?
14. Do you have a cellphone? How do you use it? Do you use text messaging? How often? Why do you text, and who do you text with most?
15. What are your favorite kinds of music? What artists or groups do you like to listen to most? Why? What music are you listening to right now? Why do you like that music more than other kinds? Are there any kinds of music or performers that you do *not* like? Why?
16. If you listen to the radio, what do you listen to? Why?
17. What video games do you play? What do you like about those games? Are there games you don't like? Why?
18. What makes you want to read, watch, play, or listen to something? How do you decide? What makes you dislike reading, watching, playing, or listening?
19. Which celebrities do you like? What makes them special for you? Which celebrities do you dislike? What do you dislike about them?
20. How do feel when teachers use music, TV shows, movies, and other things you enjoy outside of school to teach English?

FIGURE 5.4. Popular culture funds of knowledge.

anxious about sharing personal information. Others may be intensely private based on cultural values, and some may simply feel embarrassed to disclose certain information. On the other hand, we realize too that some students may be overly eager to share and may go far beyond the intent of assessing their funds of knowledge. We encourage teachers to be explicit with students about the purposes of assessment, namely, to learn more about them as individuals and understand where they come from, what they know, what they like, how they learn, and what they do related to reading and learning in school. Assessing their funds of knowledge is

1. Have you ever traveled to other places? Where? Why?
2. What did you learn by traveling to other places?
3. What are your favorite places to visit? Why?
4. Where would you travel if you could go anywhere you wanted? Why? What would you do there?
5. What are the most important things happening in the world today? Why are these most important for you?
6. Who are the most important or influential people in the world today? Why do you think they are important?
7. What makes you want to pay attention to current events?
8. What makes you decide to ignore a news story? What makes you want to learn more?
9. What makes you want to learn something new? When you want to learn something, how do you usually do it?
10. Who do you learn the most from? What makes them good teachers?

FIGURE 5.5. General knowledge/current events.

not intended to make students reveal private matters or confess personal problems to authority figures. The point is to learn *with* them and see how their everyday lives can be linked with the things they will learn and do during English class and to make the curriculum more acceptable to them as readers.

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We also realize that our protocol is almost certainly incomplete. The questions and categories are in some ways arbitrary. As noted, teachers should adapt the questions and adjust the categories in any way that generates the most (and most useful) data for *their* context.

Even more importantly, teachers must remember that data collected by assessing students' funds of knowledge doesn't replace the need to teach ELA content, but rather *supplements and complements* that disciplinary knowledge. A teacher, for example, who uses students' knowledge of video games is not "teaching video games" in English class and should never allow students, colleagues, administrators, or parents to misconstrue this limited use. Rather, that teacher is using systematically collected assessment data to identify and use topics, models, and text features of video games to help students understand, talk about, and practice disciplinary knowledge and skills in reading for English language arts

(for more detailed information and examples, see Chapter 11). When teachers explain to interested parties how their use of students' funds of knowledge benefits their academic success, the teachers invariably experience support and encouragement from these parties.

Using video game knowledge (or any other atypical kind) doesn't lead to a disregard for disciplinary knowledge and academic work. Rather, it *augments* that knowledge and work by providing topics that frame disciplinary practice in ways marginalized readers find especially compelling, thereby increasing their motivation. Their ready familiarity with such funds of knowledge makes them feel more able to understand academic reading content and practices—increasing their self-efficacy. Their knowledge about texts and topics from these funds positions them as primary knowers who have clear and valuable contributions to make during classroom discussions and activities related to school reading.

Consequently, assessing and using students' funds of knowledge to contextualize reading instruction in English leads to the kinds of engagement that we know correlate positively with increased learning, improved motivation, and lifelong reading. This outcome includes improved performance related to standards and standardized assessments (Guthrie, 2002). Having offered a protocol for assessing students' funds of knowledge, in the next section we describe how those data can be used to guide reading instruction.

USING FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE IN TODAY'S SCHOOL SYSTEM

Friese et al. (2008) assert that selecting texts solely on the basis of students' interests and knowledge outside of school is not acceptable. We agree with that proposition. Just because the majority of students in a particular classroom enjoy a particular television program, book, film, or musical genre does not mean that the text they enjoy so much is appropriate or useful for academic instruction. We definitely do not subscribe to the clichéd notion that TV "rots the brain," but we absolutely acknowledge that some texts are inappropriate for use in teaching students to read. After all, the texts may involve content that is excessively profane or otherwise adult, or the texts simply may lack quality in terms of their structure, content, and production. All media formats—including the novels and poetry typically valued in English language arts—include texts that most would deem to be low-quality in terms of content, production, or both. However, just as there are obviously high-quality literary texts teachers can use to help students learn to read,

there are also high-quality nontraditional texts from outside of school that are useful too.

All quality texts, whether print or nonprint, involve the use of structures, genres, techniques, topics, and patterns that reflect diverse content in the ELA curriculum. The teacher's role in applying assessments about students' specialized funds of knowledge is to make clear connections between their funds of knowledge and the disciplinary content and practices involved in reading. There is content unique to ELA that students need to learn for success in school and real knowledge that needs to be taught in anticipation of state-level assessments. However, just as teachers should avoid choosing texts and topics based on students' interests alone, they should also not select texts and topics solely on the basis of mandated and/or state-level assessments that fail to respond to students' personal knowledge and literacy needs.

All quality texts involve the use of structures, genres, techniques, topics, and patterns that reflect diverse content in the ELA curriculum. The teacher's role in applying assessments about students' specialized funds of knowledge is to make clear connections between their personal knowledge and the disciplinary content and practices involved in reading.

The key is to blend traditional assessment data with data from the assessment of students' funds of knowledge to generate a more balanced and responsive curriculum and supportive instructional practices. Greenleaf et al. (2001) correctly note that, "helping students master academic literacy practices … does not mean a return to isolated skills-based instruction" (para. 25). However, it is equally true that teaching comprehension strategies, text structures, and vocabulary through the use of systematically assessed and *relevant* topics, content, and activities helps marginalized readers make sense of academic texts and increases their reading achievement in school.

As we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 11, we recognize that many teachers may feel strongly that using pop culture texts such as movies, music, and television programs involves "dumbing down" the curriculum as compared to using traditionally defined "classic" books and poems in school. However, exclusively using texts that *fail to interest* students—as many classic novels and poems apparently do—results in decreased motivation, frustration for readers who struggle to comprehend those texts, and lower-quality engagement. Moje et al. (2004) found that popular culture was not only an important fund of knowledge unto itself but perhaps *the most important fund of knowledge available* for teaching students reading in schools. They found that using popular culture texts—especially music—helped students feel more able to engage with

their peers in ways that supported their identities, increased their sense of efficacy as readers, and therefore supported higher levels of engagement and reading achievement.

The use of students' funds of knowledge related to pop culture texts like music is perhaps obvious for most English teachers. Popular music lyrics are easily used to provide students with familiar texts that use poetic structures commonly taught in the discipline. Lyrics involve rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and many other types of figurative language. They also use traditional poetic structures such as stanzas, refrains, and choruses. Just like traditional poetry, they involve topics such as love, family, identity, friendship, war, death, change, loss, and countless others that can be used to generate themes for reading, writing, speaking, listening, visually representing, and blending the language arts in ways that are essential for success in school and life. It may be less obvious how assessment of students' home lives, family structures, and work experiences are useful in teaching reading.

Assessing students' funds of knowledge is not just useful in terms of selecting texts and topics students find interesting. Doing so also provides information about what they value most, how they interact with different kinds of people in their daily lives, how they are used to using language, how they understand their own roles and responsibilities in life, and more. So, for example, a teacher might learn that the majority of students in the classroom have parents who work in factories—or in managerial jobs, or in service industries—thereby suggesting particular familiar topics and themes that could be useful in selecting texts and designing activities. In addition, the teacher might find that the majority of students are used to communicating with adults and peers outside of school in ways that are highly interactive and in which people are not only expected to seek attention but to *compete* for it based on cultural or community values. In such a case, the teacher can use that assessment data to understand why certain students might appear to speak out of turn during classroom interactions and recognize when and how to teach such children the modes of participation required in English as an academic discipline. At the same time, the teacher can use assessments of students' family and community funds of knowledge to more fully compreheend their need for collaborative learning techniques, explicit instruction, and relevant content to systematically support and affirm their identities while still teaching them the content and practices required by the formal curriculum.

By the same token, a teacher might find that a particular group of students comes from a family or community background in which children are expected to be highly deferential to adults and authority figures and therefore inclined to wait for instructions and information as a matter of respect. In such cases, the teacher could use that information not

only to select texts that help students understand their own lives but also to design instruction that systematically provides opportunities to work in ways they find comfortable while progressively acquiring skills they need for social contexts where expectations differ—as well they might in school and working life.

Students' family and community funds of knowledge may reveal a great deal about how students view and use different kinds of texts and communications. Teachers are often shocked when they discover that students do not already know certain vocabulary, elements of fiction, writing and reading conventions, or ways of communicating that are expected and valued in middle school. By beginning the assessment process for reading instruction with students' funds of knowledge, teachers can learn more about what, how, why, and whether students read and write for various purposes. Based on that information, they can then collect additional data and further analyze the information to anticipate students' needs for ELA reading.

For example, if students come from family, community, and work backgrounds where reading and writing are not commonly used, teachers can better anticipate the specific concepts, skills, and practices students will need in order to participate in class. If they come from backgrounds in which computer and Internet access is rare, marginalized readers may require more direct instruction and opportunities to learn and practice keyboarding, using search engines, and evaluating the utility of various Internet websites (Moje et al., 2004). If students are actively participating in peer cultures where text messaging is commonplace or routine, then teachers can decide both when and how they might use that activity to engage students in communication during reading activities. And, of course, the data collected about students' extracurricular lives should always be used to help choose texts, adapt them in selective ways, and assign them at opportune times to help students learn in ways that are maximally helpful to them.

By collecting such detailed specific data about middle schoolers—especially marginalized readers—teachers can gradually integrate their heightened understanding of the students' worldview into traditional instructional practice. As Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2007) recommend, teachers can integrate students' specialized funds of knowledge into formal instruction by separately identifying the content to be taught (topics), the problems embedded in that content (opportunities for higher-order thinking), the disciplinary element that students should learn as a result of the instruction (skills and concepts), and finally students' prior knowledge, "including patterns of language used in their community, at home, and with peers" (p. 99). Teachers can use this approach to design instructional activities and assessments that are responsive to the knowl-

edge of readers who may have been marginalized in past classroom experiences.

English teachers can and should continue to teach students the skills and content they need to do well on such traditional assessment tools as essays, quizzes, and standardized tests. They can also help students learn to participate in their own reading instruction by creating assessments in which students use their funds of knowledge to "perform, create, produce, or do something" that involves higher-order thinking, represents "meaningful instructional activities," involves "real-world applications," and enables them to move step by step toward a classroom environment that helps marginalized readers eventually become primary knowers (Corcoran, Dershimer, & Tichenor, 2004, pp. 213–216).

There can be little doubt that teachers can better support marginalized readers when they assess funds of knowledge beyond school. However, such data can be used wisely or poorly. Moll et al. (1992) warn that educators must avoid stereotyping students based on findings about funds of knowledge. For example, assessment data showing that a particular group of students enjoys hiphop or country music does not mean that all those students are equally fans of that music genre or that implementing references to just any hiphop or country music will necessarily be useful in enhancing reading instruction. Similarly, finding that even a majority of students in a class feels comfortable communicating in competitive ways does not necessarily mean that every reading activity should therefore emphasize competition.

Before applying such assessments wholesale, teachers must ask their students what certain texts mean to them, how they use them, why they communicate in certain ways in certain situations, and so forth. Based on how they refine the funds of knowledge data, teachers can best determine what students need for success in school and how to structure classroom interactions to the greatest advantage. Without that considering the data's implications carefully, teachers risk alienating students even more, or stereotyping them, or failing to connect their specialized knowledge to disciplinary content in ways that prove productive for all.

Teachers must take steps to assure that they keep up with students' ever changing and expanding knowledge and experiences in order to keep reading instruction relevant and responsive to their needs—especially when working with marginalized readers.

Importantly, the funds of knowledge data useful for teaching reading in one classroom are not always the same data that will be useful for teaching in another classroom—or even necessarily anywhere else in the same school (Moje et al., 2004). What students know, do, and value in

one neighborhood or household or geographic location may vary greatly when compared with students in another group. Teachers must take steps to assure that they keep up with students' ever changing and expanding knowledge and experiences in order to keep reading instruction relevant and responsive to their needs—especially when working with marginalized readers. As is true with any form of assessment, teachers must periodically collect, review, and analyze new data to make adjustments and consistently improve their methods. Such ongoing purposeful assessment is the ultimate goal enshrined by the International Reading Association's standards (IRA, 2009).

SUMMARY

Even as we strongly encourage middle grade English teachers to work with so-called struggling readers to systematically assess their specialized funds of knowledge, we realize that current demands for accountability and testing make it difficult to implement that approach as fully as we might like. However, as Marsh (2006) concludes, "If we do not ensure … teachers are aware of the realities of children's out-of-school literacy lives, shaped as these are by popular culture, media, and new technologies, then we are likely to continue to have literacy curricula … that are anachronistic and inadequate" (p. 173). If teachers allow themselves to simply implement the curriculum and tests required by schools and states without regard for students' existing knowledge, values, and practices, then they will inevitably perpetuate the current situation in which many students "struggle" because they aren't given the time, resources, reasons, or opportunities they need to be successful (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Scherff & Piazza, 2008).

Still, it is impossible to ignore the workplace conditions and political realities of public schools and high stakes reading assessments that get in the way of responding to marginalized readers' needs (Lee, 1998). Current standards and state/federal accountability systems constrain curriculum to an extreme degree that makes it difficult and even risky for teachers to integrate students' funds of knowledge. Lee notes that students (as well as parents, administrators, and teachers) may resist assessments that don't look like traditional schooling because they may violate their assumptions about what they think should happen in school (teachers lecturing to students who sit quietly in rows, completing worksheets, taking multiple-choice tests, reading particular "classics," etc.). Most teachers probably need to take two-steps-forward, one-step-back approach to integrating students' funds of knowledge into existing traditional practices.

However, just as literacy is a social phenomenon, so are assessment and policymaking. Although Sarroub and Pearson (1998) have characterized the reform of standardized reading assessment as "two steps forward, three steps back," the pressure to "teach to the test" is ultimately not an acceptable requirement that professional reading teachers readily embrace (p. 97). It may, indeed, be necessary for teachers and schools to ensure that students meet the requisite standards for high-stakes reading assessments. But that necessity must be understood for what it is, namely, a politicized marker supposedly indicating efficiency, not a pedagogically justifiable practice that helps children or even improves curriculum and instruction. As Johnston and Costello (2005) observe, "High stakes accountability testing has consistently been demonstrated to *undermine* teaching and learning" (p. 258). It sometimes forces teachers to simplify, drop, or simply ignore practices, texts, and knowledge about students that they would otherwise use to enhance instruction, motivation, and the learning environment. Most significantly, Johnston and Costello (2005) argue that it is "premature" to label any child as struggling "without first eliminating the possibility that the child's progress is a result of poorly configured instruction" (p. 263). When state departments and school districts use high-stakes tests at the expense of teacher decision making and local data, it "has everything to do with politics and relatively little to do with research" (p. 265).

Such conditions do more than make the labeling of some students as struggling readers premature; it makes such labeling unethical. While we acknowledge that political issues and the realities of standardized testing may impede teachers from using students' funds of knowledge as fully as possible to improve reading instruction, finding ways to blend our approach with existing practices is not only useful but essential to the well-being of youth, teachers, and schools in the 21st century. As standards for reading assessment emphasize, our job is to use assessment to meet the needs of our students—not just to label students with their reading difficulties.

The realities of standardized testing may prevent teachers from using students' funds of knowledge as fully as possible to improve reading instruction. However, as standards for reading assessment emphasize, our job is to use assessment to meet the needs of our students.

Questions for Reflection

1. List what you know about the students in your classroom, school, and community. How much of what you know addresses the questions offered here about assessing students' own funds of knowledge?

2. Try asking your students about the ways they talk with adults and authority figures outside of school. Ask them why they communicate in those ways, and talk with them about what they think is the most appropriate and useful way for teachers to talk to students in English class. How does the information you get from these conversations affect your beliefs about teaching and managing in your classroom?
3. Today it is common for schools to utilize "common planning"—a practice in which teams or departments design curriculum and lessons so that each class is studying the same topics in the same ways while using the same texts at the same time. How could your department or team use students' funds of knowledge during common planning without sacrificing consistency in instruction?
4. Many schools simply don't have a sufficient budget to purchase new texts that address students' changing interests over time. How might knowing more about students' funds of knowledge help you connect the texts your school *does* have to students' real lives outside of school?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gonzalez, N. E. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Lewis, J. (Ed.) (2009). *Essential questions in adolescent literacy: Teachers and researchers describe what works in classrooms*. New York: Guilford Press.