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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from Alpha, one of four school districts examined in a series of case studies that investigated the complex relationship between reading assessment and instruction. The research was situated in the context of school decision making. Teachers, principals, parents, students, and central office staff were interviewed to determine how decisions were made in the district and how that decision-making process influenced assessment and instruction. In addition, teachers were observed, and discussions were conducted with them about the observations. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and field notes from the observations were elaborated. A constant comparative method was used to identify patterns in the data. In Alpha, it was found that assessment-as-test had little impact on instruction. Tests were given and scores were noted, but teachers' opinions, often based on their own non-standardized assessments, were valued more than data from standardized tests. Teachers in Alpha had both control and autonomy; they were seen as professionals and as decision makers. In this district, the focus was on the individual--students, teachers, schools--and the emphasis was on responsibility, not on accountability. (One table and two figures of data are included; a letter to prospective schools describing the research project, and a list of interview and observation codes are attached.) (Author/RS)

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ASSESSMENT AND DECISION MAKING IN ALPHA

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

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Abstract

This report presents findings from Alpha, one of four school districts examined in a series of case studies that investigated the complex relationship between assessment and instruction. The research was situated in the context of school decision making. Teachers, principals, parents, students, and central office staff were interviewed to determine how decisions were made in the district and how that decision-making process influenced assessment and instruction. In addition, teachers were observed, and discussions were conducted with them about the observations. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and field notes from the observations were elaborated. A constant comparative method was used to identify patterns in the data. In Alpha, it was found that assessment-as-test had little impact on instruction. Tests were given and scores were noted, but teachers' opinions, often based on their own non-standardized assessments, were valued more than data from standardized tests. Teachers in Alpha had both control and autonomy; they were seen as professionals and as decision makers. In this district, the focus was on the individual--students, teachers, schools--and the emphasis was on responsibility, not on accountability.

ASSESSMENT AND DECISION MAKING IN ALPHA

"I think that Alpha will anchor one end of the continuum"

Research Team Member, Fall 1988

The field of reading education generally seems to agree that assessment (defined as *testing*) drives instruction--that is, teachers teach to the test. A review of the literature suggests that this view of assessment is grounded, for the most part, in large-scale studies that have found that teaching practices change in response to pressures to increase student performance or to help them "do well" on standardized, norm-referenced tests (see, e.g., Herman & Dorr-Bremme, 1983; Popham et al. 1985; Salmon-Cox, 1981). Those of us involved in this research project wondered what these findings meant in terms of particular teachers in particular classrooms in particular districts. Our wondering led us to formulate a number of specific questions: What was life like in a school that was attempting to raise its test scores? Were daily patterns of instruction in those schools different from those in schools that did not seem highly invested in raising test scores? What was the relationship between textbook orders (kind and company) to testing. Might an individual teacher feel unaffected by test pressures, yet be required to use materials that had been specifically chosen to match test items? And what about policies for passing versus retaining students? Might a teacher feel relatively free from test pressures during the year, then be told that only students with certain reading levels could pass to the next grade, a grade in which standardized tests were administered?

To address these questions, and thus to move our understanding from the abstract (research indicates that testing drives instruction) to the concrete (what does this mean in the lives of particular teachers/schools/districts?), we conducted case-study research in four school districts.[1]

For our research, we chose districts we thought would have different ideas about the relationship between assessment and instruction: (a) a district with a reputation for being a *low stakes* district--scores were acknowledged and then filed; (b) a *high stakes* or test-driven district; (c) a district known for its high test scores and the belief of its personnel that the consistent pattern of such scores gave them license to do pretty much whatever they wanted (although the district felt that the community would "pull in the reins" if test scores dropped); and (d) a district concerned about its test scores because of how they were perceived in the community. Personnel in this district worried that what they considered "low" test scores meant that their reading program needed to be changed. We designated these districts Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta.

We chose and contacted Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, explaining our interest to central office personnel and asking if their district would be willing to participate in the study. Meanwhile, the superintendent of the fourth district, Delta, contacted us and asked to participate in the study.

In our conversations with school personnel, we explained that our interest was in the relationship between standardized tests and instruction, and that we wanted to situate both tests and instruction within a broader framework of instructional decision making so that we could better understand the more subtle influences of one on the other (e.g., textbook purchasing policies) (see letter in Appendix A). We also explained that we were interested in the seldom talked about assessment that was not test (e.g., teacher observation) and the relationship of that form of assessment to instruction. All participants, therefore, understood that we were interested in decision making as it related to assessment (both as test and not-as-test) and instruction.

[1]The four case studies are available as a Center for the Study of Reading Technical Report.

Before the study began, and based on time and staff limitations, we decided to focus on two buildings per district, two teachers per building. The districts responded differently to our plan. In Alpha, central office staff notified all teachers that we wanted to conduct a study and asked them to contact us if they were interested. In that district, 7 teachers in one building and 2 in another participated. In Beta, central office staff decided which buildings and teachers would participate. In Gamma and Delta, central office staff invited teachers and principals to a meeting to hear about the study and then choose 2 schools from among those interested.

We used interviews and observations as our means of collecting data, interviewing key participants in all four sites: central office personnel, principals, teachers, parents, and students. The interviews with teachers were tied to our observations of their classrooms. The first interview was held prior to the first observation, and conversation-like interviews were held after each of 3 observations. The fifth interview followed the final observation. With the participants' permission, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Field notes were taken during the observations and elaborated afterward. These field notes were returned to the participants for their comments and, when appropriate, further elaboration.

The observations provided an opportunity to ground our interview questions in the concreteness of teachers' personal experiences. We could see which books they used, how they graded papers, and how they responded to students. We were then able to ask teachers about the relationship of those classroom-based decisions to the broader issues of assessment and instruction.

The data (audiotapes and elaborated field notes) were read and coded, using descriptive codes (see Appendix B). Tenuous labels emerged from the initial reading of the data. These codes were revised and refined until the codes adequately captured the content of what we had seen and heard. The codes were intended to facilitate analysis. The process of careful, descriptive coding also focused our reading of the data and helped us begin to identify patterns in the data.

After the coding was completed, one member of the research team took primary responsibility for each district. A constant comparative approach was used in the analysis. Each researcher read and reread the data, looking for and identifying patterns. Once patterns had been identified, the data were read at least one more time for evidence that might disconfirm the patterns. The researcher then presented the patterns in a case study that aptly captured what we had learned about assessment and instruction in that district.[2] Meanwhile, members of the research team continued to meet with each other, sharing possibilities and patterns. These case studies were returned to all participants for their feedback, and changes, as necessary, were made in subsequent versions of the case studies.

Once we had a clear understanding of the patterns within districts, the data were read again. This time a new member of the research team, building conceptually on the analysis done in each district, reanalyzed all the data to identify patterns across districts. The data were then reread to confirm those patterns and identify salient examples, and read a final time to find negative cases, instances in which the pattern could not be confirmed. Once all patterns were confirmed, and therefore considered trustworthy, a cross-site analysis was prepared.[3]

The District in Context

School districts, like people, have reputations, and the district we called Alpha was no exception. Rumor had it that Alpha adopted no textbooks and that textbook salespersons dreaded visiting the district because, to sell books, they had to approach each teacher individually. Teachers had their own budgets for materials and chose what would be used in a given room in a given year. Alpha seemed different

[2]A fifth case study was conducted in Ohio. It is also available as a Technical Report.

[3]The cross-site analysis is also available as a Technical Report.

from other districts most of us had known or had read about. We weren't familiar with districts in which teachers choose materials; indeed, most of us were more familiar with districts in which materials were mandated by the central administrations. Influenced by our prior experiences, we began to think that autonomy might be an issue in our study. When sites were selected, we chose Alpha because we thought it would "anchor one end" of a decision-making continuum. We had reason to believe that teachers had a great deal of control over what happened in their classrooms.

The city of Alpha was home to a major university. Approximately 40,000 people lived in this small midwestern city and 5,000 of those people were children who attended the Alpha schools. Six of the eight schools were "neighborhood" elementary schools; there was one junior high school and a separate high school. Roughly 70% of the students were white, 20% were Black, 7% were Asian, 1.3% were Hispanic, and .1% were Native Americans (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

David Pearson, a member of the research team, called the associate superintendent, Dr. Gage, to ask if Alpha might be interested in participating in a study on assessment and decision making. An appointment was arranged and two members of the research team met with Dr. Gage the following week. We outlined the study and provided Dr. Gage with a typed overview (see Appendix A). Dr. Gage suggested that we attend the next principals' meeting, tell the principals about the study, and invite them to participate. We did so and principals, in turn, shared our invitation with teachers. Shortly afterwards, we received a phone call from one of the teachers at Alpha I. Six of the teachers at that school were interested and wanted us to come to a meeting after school the following Thursday. At that meeting, we explained the project and answered questions. The teachers said they would get back to us if they were interested. Subsequently, 5 of the teachers contacted us, indicating that they wished to participate in the study. Members of the research team were "assigned" to each teacher and called the teachers to arrange times for interviews and observations.

Later we received a telephone call from Ms. Beck, a teacher at a school that subsequently became Alpha II. She too had heard about the study from her principal and was interested in participating. We explained that we were hoping for two teachers per school and asked if she knew anyone else who might be interested. She called back to say that she had talked to several teachers. Could we come to a meeting at her school? We did and, as at Alpha I, explained the study and answered questions. A couple of days after the meeting Ms. Beck called back to say that only she and Ms. Anderson, her former student teacher and now a first-year kindergarten teacher, were interested.

Our original plan was to have two experienced teachers, Grades 1-6, at each school. We had also hoped for differences in teaching styles. The situation at Alpha II caused us to rethink that plan. Ms. Anderson's classroom didn't fit our grade-level criteria and it seemed possible that Ms. Beck and Ms. Anderson might have similar teaching styles because of their previous professional relationship. However, we eventually decided to consider the uniqueness of their situation as an opportunity to get another perspective on assessment and decision making. After all, teachers provided our only inroads to the Alpha classrooms. We could go only where we had been invited and, having been invited, it seemed more reasonable to appreciate the opportunity than to reject it. Research-team members contacted the two teachers and made appointments for interviews and observations. Other members of the team scheduled interviews with principals, administrators, and parents.

Literacy Instruction

Because 7 Alpha teachers participated in this study (instead of the anticipated 4 per district), the amount of information from teachers was extensive: We had 584 pages of field notes, and 167 pages of text from transcribed interviews. After several rereadings of this data and numerous computer searches by codes, we began to have a sense of how assessment and instruction were related within and across classrooms. In this section, we provide portraits of individual classrooms in order to provide a sense

of the particular (Bloome, 1992), to reveal the unique. Our comments reflect what was observed/recorded on the three days in which we observed.

Alpha I

We observed four classrooms in Alpha I. Ms. Clark taught a first/second-grade multi-age class; Ms. Deal taught second grade; Ms. Erb and Ms. Frank, both of whom participated in the study, team-taught third and fourth grades; Ms. Gough and her partner team-taught fifth and sixth grades. In these classrooms, teachers provided one-on-one, small- and large-group instruction. In addition, students were often involved in research projects and independent assignments. Work on these activities was woven into the day. For example, in some classrooms students did independent work for most of the day and moved briefly out of that in order to participate in small-group math instruction, reading groups, or social studies discussions.

Ms. Clark, First/Second Grade

When we visited in Ms. Clark's classroom, we noticed a number of student projects and trade books related to archeology. On the walls and on the blackboard there was information about archeological time periods. "Typical projectile points" were displayed on a bulletin board. It appeared that the children were involved in doing their own research about archeological periods using a variety of resources, including books. Within this context, Ms. Clark set aside time for meeting with reading groups.

We observed Ms. Clark's room in December and January; during those observations, she had scheduled reading group meetings in the morning. There were three homogeneously organized groups, and specific tasks were assigned to each group. For example, one day in January, one group was working on *s*. On one worksheet, they were to decide which words had the /s/ sound, and, using the boxes under each picture, put the *s* in the correct position: beginning, middle, or end of the word. A second worksheet contained pictures of objects. Students were to decide if the name of the object contained an /s/ sound. If it did, Ms. Clark instructed them to cut out the picture and paste it onto large *S* shaped forms she had provided. A second group read a story from a basal and answered teacher-made questions. They also made a list of the things from the story that might be found in their town. A third group made a list of headings found in a nonfiction basal selection. Ms. Clark told both these groups that they could read when they were done with their work. One of the students from the third group choose a [illegible]ly Boy novel and explained to us that he could choose what he wanted to read, but that he couldn't choose just anything; rather, what he chose had to be "pretty thick." Ms. Clark moved from group to group, discussing their work. For example, on this particular day in January she reviewed the headers that the third group had chosen, while an aide discussed the lists that the second group had made. Most of the time with the first group was spent explaining the /s/ sound and providing and clarifying directions for worksheets.

Ms. Deal, Second Grade

Ms. Deal's reading program was based on trade books and student-generated texts. She also provided time each day to read to the children. Skills instruction was provided within the context of these experiences. One day in December, three children in one group made books. On the first three pages they wrote about things they did not like, and on the fourth page, they wrote about something they did like. In introducing this experience, Ms. Deal explained about contractions:

> Ms. Deal: We are going to start a new book, but before we begin we need to talk about some words. What does this say? [refers to *don't*]. Do you see that funny mark? Does anyone know what it is?
>
> Student: Apostrophe

Ms. Deal: Two words smushed together. . .cover up the letters so all you see is *do*. What does it say now?

Student: I do like.

Ms. Deal explains contractions using the example of *do* and *do not*.

Field notes, Ms. Deal's classroom, 12/6/88

As the children began writing, Ms. Deal helped with spelling--sometimes helping children sound out the word, sometimes spelling the word for them and other times suggesting that they get help from each other. When the books were completed, the children read their own aloud and then borrowed each others' to read silently.

The second group began by re-reading copies of the *Little Red Hen* (Galdone, 1982) they had made. Ms. Deal then introduced a new book *Frog and Toad are Friends* (Lobel, 1970). Again, reading instruction was provided within the context of the book:

Ms. Deal: Open up to the very first page where there is a picture. This is the title page and it tells you who wrote the book, Arnold Lobel, and who publishes the book. Turn it to the next page. On this page it says, "For Barbara Barack." That means he wrote it for someone he really liked. This is called a dedication. Turn to the next page. What does this say?

Student: Contents

Ms. Deal: *Contents* makes the /k/ sound. It tells what is in the book. Look at *Spring*. It says *4* next to it. What's the *4* for?

Student: Starts on page four.

Ms. Deal: Let's check to see if that's true. [Students do so.]

Then Ms. Deal tells them that this a story about two guys that are the best of friends. She says that they've read other stories about best friends. She directs them to turn to the first chapter, titled *Spring*.

Ms. Deal: Read in your head, and if there are words you don't know, I'll help you with them.

Field notes, Ms. Deal's classroom, 12/6/88

There were several words that the children did not know, and when responding, Ms. Deal often commented on the meanings of those words:

Student: Does this say "blah"?

Ms. Deal: Yes. . . . What time of year is this? Do you know what toads do in the spring? Why would Toad say "blah"? Does he want to wake up?

Field notes, Ms. Deal's classroom, 12/6/88

The children continued to read the first page silently and then took turns reading a few more pages aloud. Ms. Deal then instructed them:

> Go find a quiet place to finish this story. It's a hilarious story because he tricks Toad. When you finish, bring back the book and we'll talk about it tomorrow.
>
> Field notes, Ms. Deal's classroom, 12/6/88

A third group began by making plans to rehearse a puppet show they had written. Ms. Deal then handed them each a copy of *The Boxcar Children* (Warner, 1942) and talked with the children about what had happened so far and what might happen next. The children were told to find a quiet place to read the chapter and to answer the questions that Ms. Deal had prepared. In the fourth group, one of the children had brought in the book *Aesop's Fables* (retold by Paxton, 1988), and Ms. Deal and the children discussed the author and the fact that there is a moral to each fable. *Swiss Family Robinson* (Wyss, 1986) was also discussed, because another child wondered if the two books had the same author. Ms. Deal then directed the children's attention to the book of fables they had been reading. She asked them to read up to "The Bear and the Crow." However, she told them that before they started reading, she wanted them to put some words in alphabetical order. One of the students asked what that had to do with fables. Ms. Deal explained that it did not have anything to do with fables but they were going to be starting work on library skills and needed to learn how to find words in alphabetical order.

On another day we observed, the children used books as part of an animal unit. They searched through the books, each picking three animals that they wanted to know about or that were their favorites. They wrote the names of the animals in their journals and then wrote about a pet they had or wished they had. A week later, the morning began with a discussion of what the children had learned about animals thus far. Ms. Deal introduced the concepts carnivore, herbivore, and omnivore and then instructed the children "to write (in their journal) what a carnivore, herbivore, and omnivore is and then draw an animal that fits in each class."

Ms. Erb and Ms. Frank, Third and Fourth Grade

There were 53 students in this multi-age classroom and, for most of the year, Ms. Erb and Ms. Frank held one-on-one weekly reading and writing conferences with each student. For a few weeks, they established group conferences in order to meet the needs of their student teachers who wanted experience with more traditional reading groups. During the one-on-one conferences, teachers talked with children about the books that they had been reading and about the resulting journal entries. Ms. Erb explained that many of their ideas for book conferences came from Ms. Gough, another teacher in their building, and that the conferences generally followed a pattern: prior to the conference, students turned in a book conference notebook and their book. The notebooks contained book summaries that the students had written. Ms. Erb and Ms. Frank reviewed the summaries, wrote questions for the students to address and asked the students to have a passage prepared to read aloud. At the conference itself, the teachers talked about "whatever seems to need the most. . .summarizing, characters, specific questions." Ms. Erb explained that the conferences were like conversations, and that the needs of the individual student determined the content of the conference.

The metaphor of conversation also applied to small-group conferences led by Ms. Frank or Ms. Erb. For example, in a discussion about the book, *The Case of the Hungry Stranger* (Bonsall, 1963), Ms. Erb asked the students about both plot and characters and pointed out the importance of basing their predictions on what was in the text. In addition, she drew their attention to the language of the text:

> Ms. Erb asks about the word *let's*. The students discuss what it might mean and conclude that it was a contraction that meant "let us." One of the students then notes that one of the characters in the book looked heavier and wondered if that was

because he had been eating cookies all the way through the story [and therefore would have been the culprit].

The students discuss the fact that it could not have been that particular boy who had been eating the cookies because the book said that the children in the story "had checked each of them." Some of the students are not sure what "checked" meant, and other children go to the text to explain that the cookies were blueberry cookies and so the children in the story had checked for blue teeth.

Another boy notes that a character named Snitch had not been shown on that page and so suggests that Snitch could not have been checked by the children.

Ms. Erb suggests they will need to check the book carefully in order to figure out who has and has not been checked. The students begin reading through the book. As they do so, they call out the names of characters who had been checked and tell what page they found that information on.

The group concludes that neither Snitch nor the heavy boy had stolen/eaten the cookies because the children in the book had checked their teeth and therefore eliminated them as suspects.

Description based on field notes, 12/9/88

These reading conferences were woven into the workshop-like framework of the day. Students temporarily left their work to participate in a conference and returned to their work when the conference was over. In Ms. Erb and Ms. Frank's room, much of the work was literacy related: students used a variety of materials, including texts, to learn about the topic they were researching and recorded information in notebooks for journals. Students then devised means of sharing what they had learned. In addition to this research focus, students also wrote both fiction and non-fiction pieces in their journals and made their own books. These were often shared with the whole class. Students then participated in literacy conversations with each other in the whole group setting:

Ms. Erb (addressing all the students): Today we have some people who would like to share their writing with you. Kenny would like to share his writing about *Peter and the Wolf*.

Students are quiet and attentive. Kenny sits in a chair and begins reading. Class listens, there are no distracted children, and when Kenny is finished they all respond with applause.

Ms. Erb: They really liked what you wrote, Kenny. (Turning to the class) Didn't he do a good job on the sequence of events?

Sara is introduced. Sara gets up and sits on the chair next to Ms. Erb. She turns the pages of her notebook and announces, "This is called *I Love New York*. . . ."

Sara stops reading, the story sounding very much like the first chapter in a book which is not yet finished.

Sara: Are there any questions or comments?

Jeff: You wrote a good story so far.

Sara: Thanks.

There are many questions and comments, such as,

Anthony: You have a lot of detail.

Laura: What's the main characters name?

Missy: When will you be done?

Field notes, Ms. Erb's classroom, 11/16/88

Independent of these sharing sessions, students read each others' work and, as appropriate, made comments. One day, for example, we overheard this conversation between two students working on their writing at the same table:

Tom: Oh, boy, by the time I finish with this it will be 100 pages!

Alice: How about, *There's Something and the Unicorn*?

Tom: *The something is out there*!

Alice: Yeah!

Tom: That's a great title!

Alice: Let me get my language notebook. *The something is out there. The something is out there. The something and the unicorn. The something in the lettuce.*

Alice gets up and goes to her bin, bringing back her language notebook. She records the title in her spiral notebook.

Field notes, Ms. Erb's classroom, 11/16/88

Ms. Gough, Fifth and Sixth Grade

Ms. Gough said she believed that students needed to read and to know quality literature. To accomplish this, she established one-on-one book conferences and literature study groups. Each week, all 59 students in this fifth/sixth-grade multi-age class signed up for 10-minute one-on-one book conferences with Ms. Gough, her team teacher, or one of the student teachers. Students kept a conference notebook in which they responded to the book, addressing questions from book conference sheets Ms. Gough had prepared. For example, there were five directions on the book conference sheet for historical fiction:

1. Name some historical events in your book
2. Your book should show achievement as well as drudgery and fun as well as struggle. Give specific examples.
3. What are the facts on which your novel is based?
4. Discuss what you learned about history.
5. Defend or refute: This story seems to be true.

The day before the book conference, the students turned in their conference notebook. Ms. Gough took the notebooks home overnight, read student entries and made written comments. She explained to us

that she expected correct spelling and grammar in all of the students' work; she set high standards and did not allow students to submit drafts. All work was to have been proofread and revised.

The morning of the book conference, students read her remarks and made any necessary corrections. In preparation for the conference, they also spent time reviewing their book. During the book conferences, Ms. Gough discussed student responses to these questions, and asked other questions. We heard, for example, Ms. Gough ask questions about plot, characters, setting, mood, and climax. She also commented on the written responses students had made, referring to grammar and spelling as necessary. In one conference we observed, a student responded to Ms. Gough's questions with discrete pieces of factual information. Ms. Gough, however, said she wanted the student to focus broadly on understanding the characters. She asked him to read part of book again.

> Ms. Gough: Reread it and be able to answer my questions. Never mind the names. Reread those 110 pages. It's a darn good book. I want you to enjoy it. Read carefully.
>
> Field notes, Ms. Gough's classroom, 12/16/88

In addition, small-group teacher-led discussions were conducted daily. These groups focused on grammar, vocabulary, writing, and literature. Lessons were often tied to the book the students were currently studying. At least one day a week was spent in literature groups discussing the book, which students had chosen collectively from among the three or four that Ms. Gough recommended. Each student brought to the group a completed worksheet of questions about particular book chapters, and the students and teacher went over the worksheets together. Ms. Gough collected these worksheets and later graded them. Students also responded to questions asked by the teacher or student teacher--questions on topics that had not previously been addressed, such as, "How did you like the story?" "Can you find anything that describes mood?" After these discussions, the teacher introduced the next section the students were going to read. Sometimes the students read parts of it together. At the end of each book, students did a project--drama, cooking, making a game, writing--that reflected their knowledge of the book.

In addition to these book conferences and literature study groups, Ms. Gough read daily to the students, and provided time for browsing for books and for reading. Indeed, since students were expected to manage their own time, they had a great deal of discretionary time and could arrange to spend significant parts of the day reading.

Alpha II

Ms. Anderson taught kindergarten at Alpha I; Ms. Beck taught first grade. Ms. Anderson had been Ms. Beck's student teacher the year before.

Ms. Anderson, Kindergarten

Ms. Anderson described "group time" as the setting for reading instruction in her classroom. During this time, the children worked in three heterogeneous groups, rotating through two work stations and group meetings with Ms. Anderson. On the days we observed, the students were given about 15 minutes for each station. Ms. Anderson's small-group lessons dealt with creative writing, writing names, identifying words, and a map worksheet. She explained that she used the map lesson because it fit in with the social studies unit and helped the children learn "reading skills such as left to right, sequencing, and following directions."

In discussing the stations in which children worked independently, Ms. Anderson said she tried to have language and math stations and something connected with the unit on which they were working, usually social studies or science. On the days we were there, these included puzzles, a fruit and vegetable

sorting game, a memory game to match upper and lower case letters, cutting and coloring train cars, and making paper hot air balloons. Students had the option of getting a book to read if they finished their work.

Some children were pulled from their stations to work individually with an aide. Ms. Anderson explained that this was the result of a special grant from the state furnishing an aide to work with children who needed extra help with reading. She said she had been told by her principal to select up to five children. The aide had tested the children by asking them to identify upper case letters in isolation, and was working one-on-one with those who could not do so. Next, she would test the children on lower case and would then work with those who did not know lowercase letters. Ms. Anderson noted, "My guess is it'll be the same students."

Ms. Anderson read to the children every day, and sometimes conducted discussions relative to the book being read. Children also read to and with other children. During one of the days we observed, for example, five first graders came to the room to work with their kindergarten partners, either writing down a story dictated by the kindergartner or delivering and reading aloud a book produced from a previous dictation. One of the kindergarten students explained that every kindergarten child had a first-grade partner.

Ms. Beck, First Grade

Ms. Beck emphasized that reading instruction involved helping students deal with letters, then words, then sentences, then pages of text. We observed her classroom in January, and her focus seemed to be on letters, sounds of letters, sight words, and vocabulary. Ms. Beck read to her students daily. Literature was one means of teaching vocabulary:

> We do use a lot of good books that the children enjoy reading, then we take the vocabulary out and break it down just as if it were a story in a reading book.
>
> Ms. Beck, 1/19/89

Ms. Beck created homogeneous groups for reading instruction. In making these placements, she considered "fluency, speed in learning new words, learning styles, and group skills." Children moved through two preprimers after mastering word lists for each story. On the days we observed, work in the small groups consisted of worksheets on short and long vowel sounds, reading a story and asking each other questions, reviewing words on flashcards or on a list, unscrambling a sentence, and doing pages from the basal workbook.

Reading groups lasted approximately half an hour and were followed by centers. Ms. Beck explained that three of her centers were language art activities, one was math, and the fifth was art. In the language arts centers, we observed students working on worksheets (sequence, rhyming words, short and long *i*), listening to a tape and answering questions on a worksheet, cutting and pasting beginning sounds, and working on a play. During Center time, students also had the opportunity to write their own books, which Ms. Beck entered into the computer. Some students also read with kindergarten children.

During both reading and Center times, teacher aides and a parent volunteer worked with some of the children. In other groups, Ms. Beck appointed a student to be "teacher of the day." The teacher of the day was supposed to make sure the group completed the assigned tasks. Ms. Beck circulated among the various groups and pairs, overseeing what was happening and making comments: "Want to check the spelling here?" "What part did you forget to do, Jeff?" "Lois is really printing nicely today."
Centers lasted approximately a half hour and were followed by whole-group instruction. On one of the days we observed, Ms. Beck first had the students read a list of sight words, then focused their attention to words that had long *a* sounds, talked about vowel rules, and gave a spelling test in which the students

had to fill in the missing vowel. On another day, Ms. Beck asked the students to tell her the words they had been working on. She listed those words on the board, reviewed a vowel rule, and then re- d them a story about a fox, telling them to listen for the characteristics of a fox. When she finished reading, she discussed the story with the children, asking them about the fox:

T: The fox has _____ eyes to help them ____at night.
S: Alert
T: Alert is a wonderful word but I am looking for. . . .
S: Big

In explaining her reading curriculum, Ms. Beck noted that she and the other first-grade teachers had chosen to plan collaboratively rather than independently. Ms. Beck explained that the teachers "meet and plan on a regular basis, usually once every two weeks. . . . We plan our language arts, our phonics at the beginning of the year, our words, our writing, our math and so on." This year, they had decided to use a basal that they had previously purchased and to have the children "work through one workbook. . .depending on the level that is appropriate for them." She noted that the teachers did not begin to use the workbook until mid- or late October and until that time, teachers worked with students to develop sight vocabulary.

What We Learned From Teachers

The above portraits capture the understandings we gained about reading instruction in each classroom. In our conversations with teachers, we sought to understand the reasons behind these scenarios. Who, for example, had chosen the books that Ms. Gough used in her room? Who decided how her classroom could be organized? Who decided membership in each literature study group? What influenced her assessment practices? We also asked teachers about decision making outside the classroom. How did materials get adopted? Who wrote curriculum? How did the decisions of the central office affect classroom practice? What was the influence of mandated testing? The answers of all 7 teachers were remarkably consistent. Indeed, we were able to identify seven themes that we felt captured teachers' beliefs about decision making in their district.

1. When we asked teachers about the decisions they made, they implicitly and explicitly talked about themselves as professionals

This theme was woven into, around, and through each and every conversation we had with Alpha teachers. Our data suggested that Alpha teachers reflected on their teaching, read professional materials, and attended conferences as a means of staying current. They seemed to define their jobs broadly--focusing on their role in the classroom, in the school, and in the district. Some, like Ms. Deal and Ms. Gough, made explicit references to Alpha teachers as professionals:

> The teacher sees herself as a professional and she is very involved in the business of education in her district.
>
> Ms. Deal, 11/29/88

> I could not work in a school where every breath to take, or what to teach or how [was determined by someone else]; I mean I could not work that way. That is not teaching. And that for me, the trust as a professional is for me to make the decisions. . . . Regulating how much paper I use, whether I bought this series or that series--ridiculous [to be] regulated by someone who doesn't have a clue as to what goes on within the classroom.
>
> Ms. Gough, 11/29/88

Ms. Anderson made a statement from which her sense of professionalism could be inferred:

> I really appreciate the confidence they have in me.
>
> Ms. Anderson, 2/6/89

Teachers also exhibited a professional stance by their critical, reflective approach to curriculum and instruction. Consider, for example, how Ms. Gough and Ms. Clark described their decisions about materials:

> History, it's impossible, the textbooks are obsolete the minute they're published, so we're filling in with New York Times articles, magazine articles. We're constantly seeking to add to what we're teaching. The sources vary. The numbers of sources vary. I guess what I'm trying to say, I try to find the material that suits the needs of the lesson--whatever I'm trying to do--filling in as much as possible for the children the broader picture.
>
> Ms. Gough, 1/20/89

> I found books in my first job not only boring, but totally inappropriate for the children. I decided that, given a chance, I would never do it that way. Leaving that place and coming here after four years of frustration was an absolute revelation. Suddenly I could use whatever I wanted to teach reading. . . . That year [teaching 3/4] I had several children who came out of a classroom of a teacher who had taught for twenty years, but had really only taught once as far as anyone could tell. . . . Several of them could not read, but. . .they had mastered the skill of filling out the programmed readers. So I had to scramble to find materials to teach them to read that would be appropriate. None of the basals seemed to do that and so I used all different kinds of things. I gave them things to read that they were interested in. They chose what they wanted to do and, guess what, they learned to read. . . .
>
> I like basals to a certain extent, some of the time, because they can be very efficient and effective, and I have children who think the way you really do reading is you sit in a circle with a "reading book." They have picked up that notion from some place or other, so every now and then I do that to make them feel better.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/9/89

Many of the Alpha teachers also referred to authors and colleagues who had influenced their decisions about curriculum. When asked about their writing program, Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb talked about the research they did on Graves and Calkins, about the influence of another teacher, Ms. Gough, and about Marilyn Burns as having an effect on their math instruction. Ms. Beck talked of Glasser's "Circle of Learning" when explaining her emphasis on helping the children work cooperatively and feel good about themselves as learners. Ms. Clark credited a college professor and the work of Mary Baratta-Lorton and Marilyn Burns as having a considerable influence on her math program. Ms. Gough mentioned the work of Adler.

Teachers also commented on their research. Ms. Gough, for example, said that one of the constraints on her was not having enough time to do research; Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb talked about taking a professional day to go "to study the new exhibit on Egypt at the Field Museum in Chicago." Ms. Frank explained that instead of attending an in-service day, she had exercised her option and submitted a proposal to do an independent study on authors.

2. When we asked teachers about decisions that were made at the classroom level, they told us that they had a great deal of autonomy.

Teachers in Alpha reported few restraints on decision making at the classroom level. Similar to our experiences as teachers, and with other teachers, Alpha teachers did note that they felt constrained by the amount of money in the district budget, by length of school day, by staff/student ratios, and by staffing for non-academic areas such as physical education and the arts. However, disenchantment was rare. Most often, teachers spoke positively about their role in the classroom. They reported feeling constrained neither by curriculum nor by materials:

> There are certain curriculum areas we are supposed to offer, and that defines some things, but for the most part we can really decide, and I love that part.
>
> Ms. Erb, 1/13/89

> [O]ur district has a unique set-up where we are each allowed to teach and create an environment that is most healthy for us as a teacher. Therefore, if I choose to work in a structured, very self-contained classroom. . .very routine-oriented classroom and that's the best way I can teach, then I am affirmed in that and I am supported in that. If I choose to work in an open-ended, an open classroom style, and, again, I meet the goals that are set down, the objectives, then I am supported in that.
>
> Ms. Beck, 2/24/89

> If you mean decision, as to what I teach or how I operate in my classroom, the decisions are at my level. In other words, no one from the administration is telling when to have math or what to teach in math or what textbooks or what materials, so those decisions are mine.
>
> Ms. Gough, 1/20/89

In response to a question about whether that meant she could request a special textbook, Ms. Gough explained:

> Sure, or I could buy it myself or find it myself. The parameters or framework is that the district has a curriculum guide, and within that guide you're free to choose what is applicable for your grade level. . .how the lesson is taught or what materials you should use would be completely up to you. . . . As a matter of fact there's no one text, no one thing for anything that we teach. . . .
>
> Ms. Gough, 1/20/89

This high degree of teacher autonomy is perhaps best summed up by Ms. Clark's response, when asked about her decision making:

> I make all kinds of decisions. I decide, given the basic curriculum requirements, what I'm going to teach, when, where, and how. I decide how I'm going to integrate those items. I decide how I will spend my money to support those items that I need to teach. I am free to do field trips or not, speakers or not, any of those kinds of things. I decide what materials I'm going to use, I decide how my groupings will be made. I decide how my time gets used. If I want to devote hours and hours to a single topic, I'm free to do that. It's based, of course, on the assumption that I will cover the other items that I'm required to. . . .

> I can buy whatever I think I need for my classroom. I am not required to buy any particular thing. I'm not required to use any particular text. I'm required to follow a curriculum and to teach certain basic things, but how I do that is my choice.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

3. When asked specifically about instructional decisions, teachers focused primarily on helping individual students to learn and to be independent learners.

In Alpha, there was very little talk about whole-class instruction, and there was very little whole-class instruction observed. Rather, classrooms seemed to be set up so that teachers could deal with students as individuals. For example, when Ms. Gough was asked about her instructional decisions, she explained how she individualized quantity and quality demands of assigned work. In addition, she noted that the type of comments she made on student work was determined by what she thought particular students could handle. Grades were similarly determined; Ms. Gough would accept a child's best effort whether or not it represented what otherwise might have been considered "good" work. Flexible due dates were used to help children establish a sense of responsibility. "I have the feeling also that I, I hope, encourage children to make decisions without me telling them. I think that's the principle under which I'm operating here."

In Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb's room, various grouping arrangements were used to meet individual needs. Math problems, for example, were often worked on in ever-changing heterogeneous groups of four; reading instruction was sometimes provided in small groups, but, more often, individual conferences were held. Scheduling was flexible, allowing for learning opportunities that arose out of individual or group interests or needs. Grouping was similarly flexible:

> In a reading group, for example, there were four students in a group that we felt were similar in ability. Because every child is so different it soon became apparent that two of them were progressing through the work much faster than the other two. There you have an instance when it would be silly to keep them in the same group. . . .
>
> Ms. Frank, 1/13/88

Ms. Erb explained that some grouping decisions were based on level of skill, which they determined by observing and working with the children. Other groups were designed around common or complementary learning characteristics. Schedules were posted and the room organized so that students knew what they should be doing and when, and could independently obtain materials, initiate activities, and execute transitions between the activities as well as within instructional areas (two classrooms and a hallway). Students had input into some grouping decisions and whether they would work alone or with a partner for some activities. Children could also choose books and activities within particular units of study. Students designed assignments for other students and later checked those assignments. Ms. Erb and Ms. Frank talked of wanting children to be "independently motivated. . .[to be able to] look at some materials and see what they can get from them and how they can use them to expand on other ideas." Ms. Frank explained that she and Ms. Erb helped the children to be independent decision makers by "constant opportunity" and "encouragement." When some children find the responsibility difficult to handle, the teachers "conference, remind, cajole, show again, urge, generate a list, send assignments home with a note, recenter use of time, and so on." As they summed up, "[C]hildren are responsible for their own learning and that learning should go on beyond the classroom. . . . It's not compartmentalized. . . . It's an integrated whole."

Ms. Deal used centers as an organizational strategy and talked about helping her second-grade students identify the centers they needed to go to in order to be more independent learners. Ms. Deal watched students, and when necessary, made adjustments to help them get going in an attempt to teach responsibility and time management. Ms. Clark encouraged and expected independence, responsibility, and "good choices" to be exercised both within the room and outside it. Within the classroom, children

were expected to obtain and return materials after using them for assigned work at centers. Ms. Clark seemed to be comfortable leaving the room for a short time and allowing children to leave the room when they needed.

At the beginning of the year, Ms. Anderson sorted her students into three homogenous groups for reading instruction, because her observations of other classrooms and her course work led her to conclude that she was supposed to. She explained, "All my life, all I've ever seen" was ability grouping in reading. She reported that she "hated" it because she couldn't get to the low students as easily. She reported seeing heterogeneous grouping used successfully in math and wondering, "if they did it in math, why couldn't they do it in reading?" She then mixed up the groups and noted that the students who had been in the low group made better progress because of the peer help. She explained, "I try to stand back and let them do and help each other.... I'm not always going to be there, but they'll have friends around them."

> [Grouping] was the best decision [I made] as far as changing something and going ahead and doing it. Some teachers would probably be afraid to go against what everybody else was doing. I've seen it done lots with math in this school, but not with reading. And I've learned that it *can* work, and it works out better with reading also.
>
> Ms. Anderson, 2/6/89

Ms. Beck saw herself as a facilitator and noted that she had instituted a routine because she felt it made students more independent. Ms. Beck also talked about trying to "affirm and support children who are making good choices," noting that "you need to allow children to be real responsible for who they choose to be." She noted that it was important to set different goals for each student:

> If [a child] came into my room reading at a third-grade level, I would expect him to leave reading at a fourth-grade level. If [a] child comes in knowing some letters, my expectation would be that at the end they would be doing some reading. You certainly don't have a certain level and if everybody makes it there, then we're fine. I think everyone has to be called upon. . .to dig down deep and move from there and beyond. I think we have to accept where they come in at and say to them, okay, here's where you're at, let's see if we can get over here to this point.
>
> Ms. Beck, 2/24/88

4. When asked about assessment, teachers talked about assessment as an information-gathering process central to teaching. They spoke of gathering information in order to inform their decision making, to communicate with parents, and to help children assess their own progress.

Teachers in Alpha were required to administer both state and district tests. Teachers seemed resentful of this mandatory testing and the time it required:

> Teachers like to make their own decisions about what, when, and how to assess.
>
> It [the new state test] was terrible. . .I really hated it because. . .we really feel that if you are going to test the children. . .you need to take the time to teach them about the test. . .It felt like we lost a month. . .and we had no choice.
>
> Ms. Erb, 12/9/88

However, Alpha teachers generally perceived themselves to be in control of the types of assessment used day-to-day in their classrooms and they perceived themselves to be in control of how all assessments were used.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

Figure 1 details the kinds and uses of assessment reported across all 7 Alpha classrooms. The last grouping--which included observing, listening, responding, looking at student work, and talking with students--accounted for the majority of the decisions that Alpha teachers reported and were observed making. Similarly, checklists, work folders, writing folders, portfolios, journals, audio tapes, conference notebooks, clipboards, notes, mental records, and narratives for parents were mentioned most often as means for keeping track of what teachers knew about each child. Indeed, when we analyzed our data we found that 71% of teacher talk about evaluation focused on informal and teacher-made assessments (see Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 about here.]

Several of the teachers described this situated approach to assessment:

> What I try to be is what the Quakers call "mindful" of what they're [the students] doing, and I try to analyze what I'm seeing. I try to understand what the information I'm gaining is actually telling me . . . I tend to go in and out of students . . . I can usually, through very short conversations, get a feel for whether or not they understand . . . and then I make a judgement based on whatever information I get . . .I look over a series of events to see if what I want to happen is happening. . . .
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

> If you give a one-on-one conference, or review your written notes in the notebook or on the clipboard, looking closely at what the child has done in his science and history notebook, looking at the file of drawings and work and so on, you have a pretty good idea of what the child is doing.
>
> Ms. Frank, 1/13/88

> I assess by observation. I notice the kinds of questions they (the students) ask, how they interact with other kids. . .I notice what they think and what they do. . . .
>
> Ms. Deal, 11/29/88

> I find there's nothing that matches just having every occasion possible to talk one-to-one, to look at work daily and weekly. . .what I'm trying to say is the evaluation is daily. Evaluation daily--all the time.
>
> Ms. Gough, 1/20/89

Consistent with their sense of control and autonomy, teachers in Alpha I decided not only how to assess, but what use to make of the resulting assessment data. Ms. Deal, for example, reported that she never used standardized tests for grouping. For ability grouping in spelling, reading, and math, she used observation and her own teacher-devised or selected measures. She used teacher-made tests to let students know what they needed to recall, "to see how that unit went over," as a way of "letting them use their brain and to get used to taking a test where. . .they couldn't go to a resource except a friend," and to inform parents about what students were doing.

Ms. Gough noted: "My own classroom operation is my own teacher-made tests. . .most of the testing is just to highlight certain things I really want them to remember, not necessarily [to] test if they have remembered. It's just a review." Regarding state mandated tests, she added: "I don't teach to the test. . .I think testing's a fact of life and that children should learn as much as possible. . .I do tell them we'd like your best effort. . . . There's not a great emphasis." She reviewed students' work and used

teacher-devised tests, conferences, and observations rather than state or district required tests for diagnostic purposes. In line with her desire for students to become independent learners, she was happy when students could "tell me what their progress is, what they need to improve, where they're doing fine." Students' ability to self-evaluate appeared to result in part from her written commentary on students' work, as well as other types of continuing evaluation occurring in the classroom.

Similarly, Ms. Clark used some formal assessments to give students "a sense of where they are. . .self-awareness of their skills and. . .limitations, and also of where they've been." Congruent with her desire for children to become independent learners and with her belief that they were capable of learning more than conventionally provided for, "I go until they begin having difficulty." She watched for physical signs--"They slow down, they twitch, they move differently"--and an increase in strategies used. Ms. Clark viewed this time as an opportunity to expand their problem-solving skills and the flexibility of their thinking.

Ms. Erb noted that district testing helped with skill grouping for math, in combination with observation and situated types of assessment. She used her own judgement with regard to writing samples required by the district. Required test results served as an indication of what children "can do on tests," but were not regarded as informative relative to the quality of classroom work a child was capable of doing. Although she looked at the students' third-grade test results, they did not alter how she taught them as fourth graders. "I feel I know them better than the test does." Formal testing was presented to students as something they had to learn how to do and "a necessary concession." Mandated test results served a final function when reported to parents who were "very concerned with tests." As for the team's own teacher-devised tests, timed tests in math were used to prepare students for formalized timed tests, to push them to be faster, and to inform them of their progress. The only other teacher-devised tests, spelling tests, were initially "used for penmanship" but were given up because they were viewed as less useful than other activities.

Ms. Anderson noted that the district "attempts to provide heterogenous grouping based on the results of early kindergarten screening. However, she initially used the ratings to group the students homogeneously. (She later decided that homogeneous grouping was ineffective for dealing with students in the lowest level group and so, went to heterogeneous groups.) Further supporting her perspective on external testing, she noted that, relative to student identification for the district's gifted program, her recommendation was ultimately more important than kindergarten screening results and that the mandatory spring testing was unnecessary because "it's not really used."

Ms. Beck favored individualized testing over group testing. She extracted and modified assessment materials to suit her needs and stated, "I have never given the actual basal reading test as is. . .I will use any and all means that I feel will help me understand my students better." She did not derive mastery scores from basal tests. She disliked the term "testing" for first graders with its connotations of finality, but rather emphasized the values of assessing until there is mastery.

> I don't like the term "testing". . .the term testing can mean that you have one chance and if you don't do it, that's kind of a mark on your life. Whereas, I would rather say we are assessing, and if the student has trouble, we reassess, and continue to assess, until there is mastery.
>
> Ms. Beck, 3/15/88

5. When asked to explain the basis for their curricular and assessment decisions, teachers talked predominantly about their personal beliefs and philosophies of education.

We spent a considerable amount of time with 7 teachers in Alpha. We talked with them, visited their classrooms, and then talked with them some more. In our conversations, we sought to understand the reasons for the decisions they made. In explaining themselves to us, they most often talked to us about their philosophy of education, although only a few referred to it as such. Ms. Clark, for example,

whom we quoted above as "being mindful" of the children, made both explicit and implicit remarks about her philosophy:

> I suppose that if you were to sit and watch me you would see a very strong philosophical bent coming through. I would hope that you would see that, that my notions of how children learn best and how they should be treated and how they should treat each other and how they should treat materials are all tied up in assessment and in decision making. . . .
>
> I do everything I can to create independence in children which creates self-awareness and self-evaluation and responsibility for learning. . . .
>
> I have this basic construct of concepts and threads that I want to teach them. I have this faith that if I listen to them and follow their direction, we'll wind up in a place that will be appropriate. It may not be typical, but it will be an appropriate response to what it is that I am supposed to be teaching them and what it is they are supposed to be learning. They are, by nature, inquisitive and highly skilled, more highly skilled than many adults give them credit for. If I stand back and intervene now and then, they do an awful lot of teaching of each other and themselves.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

Ms. Clark's beliefs, her vision of what school was and ought to be, drove what she looked for in her classroom, and what use she made of the data she gathered. Assessment devices were tools that Ms. Clark had chosen to assess progress relative to *her* intent. She mentioned, for example, that she hadn't settled on tools for math assessment and that she was "slugging. . .through some different things that I am trying to give me information." In reading, one of the tools she had chosen was the San Diego word list. To put "word lists" in perspective, here's an incident she related to us:

> I had one child who was getting books that were pleasant books, but entirely inappropriate for her, much too easy given her abilities, and she was consistently saying she couldn't read. Well, what I did was test her on the San Diego and then I was able to show her her scores from September of her first-grade year (when she was at frustration level on the pre-primer) through November of this year. She is now functioning at a mid-5th-grade level. And I waved that in front of her and she said, "Oh, that's why you keep sending me back for harder books."
>
> And she was over her funk, but for about three weeks she had refused to read. (And) I think that because I have that information in a very simple graphic form, and I have it for a year and half now that it was a very powerful tool for her to use. . . .
>
> I'm finding that (I'm) . . . showing it to the children. . .to give them a sense of where they are. I want very much for them to have self-awareness of their skills and of their limitations . . . and also of where they've been.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

Ms. Deal's list of assessment tools was similar to Ms. Clark's. She used situated assessment, she asked questions, she gave some tests. And yet what drove her decision making seemed to be different:

> I'm not one of those teachers who really looks at specific thinking processes. I really look more at what information I can give them and how they can use that information to keep broadening their knowledge . . . I just read a thing about explicit learning and

> explicit teaching by Rosenshine. I said yes, this makes a lot of sense, but I'm not that formal . . . I think about what I want to teach them and then I just do it.
>
> Ms. Deal, 3/2/89

These and other remarks, coupled with classroom observations, suggested that Ms. Deal put knowledge acquisition into the foreground. This is not to say that she did not care about thinking processes, but rather that she believed thinking skills would develop as children learned what she had decided they needed to learn. Consistent with these beliefs, Ms. Deal frequently assessed the children relative to "levels," and her comments to us were peppered with references to recalling knowledge:

> I try to find out if they can recall the terms. If they can in their own words remember things that we've talked about and be able to write it down. . . .
>
> I just go by what we've studied and these are the things I want them to recall. . . .
>
> What I was aiming to see is what they could recall. . . . It's the new terms I want to assess. If they can write it down in their own words. . .they'll be able to recall it for a long time. I. . .use the testing to see what they can pull out from memory without my guiding them through. . .I try to see where they are and what they can recall.
>
> Ms. Deal, 12/6/88

Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb provided a third example of how teachers' visions drove instruction and assessment. They co-taught a grade three/four combination. Their classroom was organized thematically. While they did some grouping for math and reading, most of the day was spent studying various topics, and math, reading, art, writing, social studies, and science were integrated into these topics. Two of their remarks captured the essence of this instructional approach:

> In the fourth grade, we have to teach about the state of Illinois. . . . However, sometimes it's been a week, a semester, a year long study. . . . Basically we have a hard time saying these two weeks we are going to study Illinois. You can't do it that way. I mean look what you've got with Lincoln and then you get into Pinkerton and all these other people who lived at the same time--biography--and then you start thinking about math and how to show 1000 and the thousands of years humans have inhabited this land and how do you show it to children, and you start building math models and the Dienes blocks to show time and when certain things took place. . . .
>
> We had this great idea of [studying] a country a week--It was supposed to be a new country every week--there were so many ideas, directions to go, the next thing you knew we were three weeks on the United States, we've been on Australia for weeks. . . . We took a professional day to study the new exhibition Egypt at the Field Museum in Chicago. . .I had lived in Egypt for a month, Ms. Frank had lived in Africa. . .anyway. . .there are just so many things. We've found we can emphasize different directions. . .mapwork, geographical features--you know children do not often have geography these days. . .we listed all these activities [for the groups to consider] . . .things they could choose from to work on. . .the group could decide just what it was they would work on.
>
> Ms. Frank, 12/9/88

Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb wanted the children to learn about learning and to develop strategies that would enable them to learn independently. Interactions with students allowed them to teach students about

learning, and to assess the type of continued support/help/intervention particular students might need. For example, they used questions such as "How do you know that?" "Where did you find out about that?" and "Can your story end here?" to enter into dialogues with and, thus, teach and assess students.

In explaining why she and Ms. Frank asked these kinds of questions, Ms. Erb noted:

> We want the children to be independently motivated. . . . Look at some materials and see what they can get from them and how they can use them to expand on other ideas. It doesn't really matter who's in the classroom, as far as we are concerned, whether we are in it or not, those children are responsible for their own learning, and that learning should go beyond the classroom. . . .
>
> Ms. Erb, 12/9/88

Ms. Beck's comments evidenced yet another philosophy; Ms. Beck believed strongly in helping the children feel good about themselves as learners. She described her job as

> [T]ouching and changing lives in a positive way allowing students. . .to somehow gain a self-worth, to build a foundation that says "you're so important and you have so many gifts and so many talents that all we have to do is help you recognize those" and to say to each child that comes into this classroom, "you are a success". . .and then you can say "you're so successful that I want you to take this risk". . . . And it's just a matter of building on the successes, and once they're successful and they can feel what that feels like and it feels good, then they will be a risk taker. But you can't ask children to come in and be risk takers if they don't know they are successes.
>
> Ms. Beck, 1/19/89

In the classroom, Ms. Beck encouraged cooperative rather than competitive learning. She gave everyone a chance to be a classroom leader, noting, for example, "all children can be teacher of the day unless they show me otherwise." Through her responses to children, she tried to help them "understand that it's okay to make mistakes, that means you're learning."

> There was this one little boy. . .and everything that I put in front of him he would throw back at me. . .and I thought, my goodness, this person has a whole lot of anger for a seven-year-old. . . .
>
> What we finally came to realize was that this child didn't know what success was. It became apparent that what I needed to do was to begin to show him that he could be successful. . . .
>
> Literally what happened one day was that I found something I was positive this child could do. . . . He finished the task and I said, "This is wonderful" and I realized that this was his first experience with "you mean this is okay, and this is acceptable and so forth. . . ."
>
> This was one of my best experiences in terms of actually touching someone and saying, "You're so important that I'm not going to let go of you."
>
> Ms. Beck, 1/19/89

6. When teachers were asked about how decisions were made in the district, they often talked positively about committees as central to the decision-making process.

Our previous experiences, both as public school teachers and, later, as university educators, had suggested that committees were not consistently well-received by educators. We knew that sometimes committees were used as "rubber-stamps" for decisions that were already made. We also knew that sometimes educators perceived committee work as separate from their jobs and therefore resented the time that committee functions required. However, teachers in Alpha consistently talked about committees as being important, useful, and valuable. They seemed to view committees as professional invitations to improve their schools and their curricula.

This pattern was evident regardless of who teachers talked about--administrators, themselves, their peers, or parents. It appeared when teachers talked of curriculum, policy (e.g., redistricting), assessment, and staff development. Teachers noted that the Alpha system was a "very open system" and that they had committees on virtually any topic imaginable." It was possible to be on committees "forever" if that was what a teacher wanted. Indeed, many of the teachers we talked with had been on several.

Over and over again, teachers talked--and talked positively--of decisions made by committees. In all the discussions, teachers talked about committees as opportunities for involvement. Not once did any of these 7 teachers make a negative or even faintly critical remark about the use of committees in the decision-making process. Consider, for example, Ms. Clark's description of how a policy on AIDS was established:

> During the last bargaining session, one of the things that the association raised was a question of the communicable disease policy, which really was a policy on AIDS, because there was an interest on the part of the staff. Some of them were beginning to be fearful of dealing with AIDS both as teachers and as colleagues. We decided during bargaining that it was too complex a subject to do properly, so we agreed that there would be a committee that would work on developing policy. We had two board members on it, and we had the assistant superintendent for special education and the personnel director also involved, so we had a mix of board members, central office staff [and teachers]. We spent almost a year gathering information, deciding where we wanted to go. We looked at policies from districts all over the state. We looked at legal decisions from all over the country. One of our board members is very actively involved in filmmaking for training of health care providers, and he is extremely knowledgeable in the area of AIDS. He brought his expertise, and what we wound up with was a revamping of what the board's attorney had suggested for an AIDS policy for students and for staff. Their firm has created a rather boiler plate approach. . .and we took it and shredded it and came up with our own. In my estimation, having read many from around the state it's. . .the best policy that I have seen. It's very much supportive of the teacher and of individual rights and confidentiality. It really has some landmark suggestions in it.
>
> Well, we took this to the board for review. They gave it a month because when you give a policy decision to the board, they bring it up on the agenda one month and discuss it and then they have a month for comment, and it was passed at the next board meeting, 7-0, based on our recommendation. . *.and that is not atypical in our district*. [emphasis added]
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

7. When teachers talked about the school board, central office administrators, or principals, they seemed to consider them as supportive of both the committee-dominated decision-making process and of high teacher control at the classroom level.

The School Board

One of the teachers interviewed had been politically active in the school district, and she gave several examples about how the school board functioned. Noting "there's a lot of conversation that goes on in this district at all levels," she described the board's decision-making process:

> Our board is quite skilled at setting policy and then leaving administration to the administrators. It's one of their strengths as a board. They draw on staff expertise in making all of their decisions. They listen to the staff. . . .
>
> Basically, what they want is a chain of command to operate. They. . .set policy, and they ask the superintendent for recommendations on policy, and the superintendent almost inevitably then goes to the administration and to the teachers, asking for commentary, suggestions, approaches. We have committees. . .on virtually any topic you can imagine, and then recommendations are made to the board and they act on them. Generally speaking, they accept the recommendations of the staff because they have high regard for the staff's input.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

Other teachers talked about the school board in a similar fashion--most often linking the school board to the role of committees in the decision-making process. Teachers also reported that the board consistently supported the committee decisions-making approach taken by the district. One teacher added that if the "board stopped being receptive. . .we'd have a new board."

Central Office Administrators

In the more than 14 hours of teacher interviews, there were only a few references to the central office staff, in spite of the fact that teachers were specifically and repeatedly asked about how decisions were made in the district. In response to a very direct question, ""Tell me about the superintendent. What does he do?" Ms. Frank, for example, noted, "He's in his last year and he makes some decisions, but. . .things are really decided by committees of parents, teachers, and administrators." Later, when asked about the high percentage of decisions that seemed to be made by committees, Ms. Frank commented, "there's probably always been that tendency" but, "I think that's how [the superintendent] does things." Ms. Clark, in discussing how the board operated, mentioned that the board asks the superintendent for recommendations and that the superintendent then goes to the administrators who, in turn, go to the teachers. Other remarks made about central office staff were similar to those noted above. Teachers talked about the central office staff relative to the committee structure in the district. The remarks of one teacher, in response to our opening question about decision making in the district ("Please give me a picture of decision making in your district"), captured the essence of what we learned across teachers:

> The structure in the district. . .is very open, and it's very liberal, in terms of looking at each individual in their role as a professional. They respect the individual teacher, as well as. . .the principal. Each person is a valued asset to the decision-making process. I find that very rewarding and helpful, working in that kind of situation. So, although the superintendent has the final say in a number of different decisions, he looks to fellow principals, school board members, and teachers for input. Most decisions made, including basic things such as calendar, how long our Christmas break is, up to curriculum decisions, are more often than not made in committees made up of

> teachers, administrators, school board members, when appropr. .te, and the superintendent, if appropriate.
>
> Ms. Beck, 1/19/89

Principals

Teachers were supportive of their principals as decision makers. Ms. Beck, for example, conveyed her respect for her principal, Mr. Jarvis, by suggesting that even though she felt perfectly comfortable taking a concern directly to the superintendent, she would "work through the ranks," taking appropriate concerns to the principal first:

> [Then] if he felt like he would like to address that problem to the superintendent, that would happen. Rarely do I, rarely do a lot of individuals, go out of rank and go directly to the superintendent. They respect administrators, the principals, and their need to be informed.
>
> Ms. Beck, 1/19/89

With regard to decision making at Alpha II, Ms. Anderson reported:

> Whenever the principal makes a big decision that affects the teachers, he tries to get their input.
>
> Ms. Anderson, 2/6/89

Alpha I teachers were also supportive of their principal. Ms. Clark noted that he was "committed to Glasser's approach to education." She explained that teachers vote on decisions, that the principal has only one vote, and that he gave up his right to veto:

> In the time that I've known and worked with him (15 years), I can think of two times where he made decisions because a decision had to be made and there was not adequate time to get the staff together.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

When discussing hiring decisions made at Alpha I, Ms. Deal commented:

> Last year there were twelve people for three openings. The principal decided which three were the best, and then the teachers interview[ed] the candidates and decide[d] which three they [thought were] the best. Then the principals and the teachers met to discuss their choices and make decisions.
>
> Ms. Deal, 11/29/88

Teachers also talked about building principals as being supportive of them. All five of the Alpha I teachers made positive remarks about their principal (he was described as "wonderful," "remarkable," and "very supportive") and often told us stories about their involvement with him. For example, when we asked Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb what it was like when their principal observed in their classroom, they smiled, laughed, and said together, "Wonderful!" They went on to explain that he would ask if it was a good week for him to come in, what was going on and what the teacher would like him to observe. He would take the time to talk with the teachers following the observation, and they felt the discussions were particularly useful because he knew the children so well. "If he saw a child walking down the hall going the other way, he would know who it was and could call out to them." Ms. Frank and Ms. Erb

described the conference sessions as "non-threatening" and noted that they felt they "could talk about anything with him."

Talk of the principal was often woven into discussion about teacher decision making. Ms. Clark, for example, talked about how observation was an integral part of her assessment: "Years ago, I was having some trouble with some of that, and (the principal) was in observing and he pointed out to me that what I was doing was staying in one quadrant of the room--which I hadn't realized." She also told of her decision to make major changes in her curriculum:

> In terms of curriculum, I went toward centers about seven or eight years ago, and that was because I was very frustrated with the basic text. I was getting bored, I was committed to staying in teaching, but I didn't want to be committed to being bored for the rest of my teaching career, and I needed something that seemed much more interesting. All of the advice I'd ever read was to do one center at a time. Well, I figured if I did that I'd chicken out. So, I put away everything that I didn't need, told (the principal) what I was going to do. We decided that I wouldn't panic until February, and it worked. I worked very hard setting it up, but it worked.

Explaining the principal's role, she noted:

> Independence. . .is not only allowed, but encouraged here. He's very supportive and encourages you to stand back and watch. He takes the approach that the teacher should be the facilitator.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

What We Learned From Administrators

In Alpha, we interviewed the principals of both Alpha I and Alpha II, as well as the superintendent, the associate superintendent (who was largely responsible for curriculum monitoring, assessment, and research), and the director of staff development/coordinator of gifted education programs. In general their comments about decision making, curriculum, and assessment were remarkably consistent with the views and practices of the teachers. Like the teachers with whom they worked, they seemed committed to establishing a system that would help everyone--administrators, teachers, and children--autonomously make good decisions. For example, in discussing the difference between accountability and responsibility (a group criterion versus an individual criterion), the principal of Alpha I revealed the preference he and his staff had for individual responsibility:

> I think what accountability does is to focus you on the entire group, whereas responsibility focuses you on the individual kid. The teachers in this building feel something very strongly about each kid.
>
> Mr. Davis, 1/24/89

When we asked him about assessment, he focused on the type of assessment with which he was personally involved--assessment of staff. He explained that he worked with each teacher to negotiate an individually tailored plan. They met together at the beginning of each year to establish personal and professional goals and objectives for the year. He felt very strongly that this individually focused teacher-assessment model had influenced teachers' models of student assessment. "One of the reasons that we look at kids on an individual basis is because teachers are looked at individually. We trust kids, and we try as early as possible to give them some real choices to make and to accept responsibility for them."

While raising a concern about the expectations that some members of the community hold about schooling, the associate superintendent, Dr. Gage, revealed his commitment to individuals:

> [N]ot everyone wants us to strive for success for *all* students. That philosophy scares some; they're more comfortable with the traditional gate-keeping functions that schools have served. . . .
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

Mr. Havens, the superintendent, in expressing his predictions about the future of education, aligned his concern about individuals with his commitment to autonomy: "The struggle to keep teacher independence alive will go on. There is reason for pessimism, but there is also reason for optimism."

This overriding concern for the individual seemed to drive administrators' views of decision making, curriculum, and assessment. The patterns in the data can be summarized in these three themes, each of which seemed to be grounded in the district's commitment to the individual:

1. Alpha administrators believed that all teachers were professionals and treated them as such.

2. Alpha administrators were committed to a shared decision-making model, a model in which teachers played a key role in determining curriculum at classroom, school, and district levels.

3. When Alpha administrators discussed assessment, they consistently valued teacher-generated assessments over standardized assessments.

The Teacher as Professional

All four of the administrators said, or more often implied, that teachers were professionals. Mr. Jarvis, the principal of Alpha II, noted that this view was held throughout the district:

> [I]t is one of the strengths of this district. They (teachers) are expected to be professionals, and I think that is what teachers like about working in this district.
>
> Mr. Jarvis, 2/28/89

He seemed to assume that teachers were professionals when he discussed his expectations about the kinds of decisions teachers made in classrooms:

> I would expect the teachers to be fully informed about their students abilities, needs, and capabilities in order to make fully informed decisions. I want a knowledgeable person in that position. I expect the person to be able to handle all of that, and we would explore all of that whenever we interview a prospective teacher.
>
> Mr. Jarvis, 2/28/89

Mr. Davis, principal of Alpha I, expressed this view of teachers as professionals both explicitly, in discussing Alpha's teacher evaluation system:

> Unless you have been specifically notified, you are considered to be an absolute professional and know what to do to promote your own growth and development.
>
> Mr. Davis, 1/24/89

and implicitly, in discussing his expectations for how he and the teachers would interact with one another:

> I like to get into professional dialogues with teachers. My expectation is that all teachers will work their (tails) off--do the best they can for every kid so that kids know what they are supposed to know when they leave. Now how they want to do that, that's their domain.
>
> Mr. Davis, 1/24/89

Shared Decision Making

Mr. Havens provided a rationale for the commitment of Alpha administrators to a shared decision-making model:

> Schools are autocratically organized but they should be democratically run. Lots of teacher input into decisions promotes trust at all levels within the system, and it brings needed expertise to decisions we have to make.
>
> Mr. Havens, 1/23/89

Dr. Gage expressed this same sentiment when he defined the shared decision-making process:

> [T]he shared decision-making process is this: decisions should be made as close to the action as possible. . .what is so hard about shared decision making is that you have to constantly protect it from erosion.
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

The curriculum committee process provided an example of how the shared decision-making model operated at the district level. A district-wide curriculum council, with membership from district administrators, principals, teachers, and chairs of each of the currently operative curriculum committees (reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and the like) oversaw all curriculum development. However, the important work, teachers and administrators noted, was done by the specific curriculum committees. The chair of each committee was a teacher who was selected by the curriculum council as the result of an open search process. That teacher was paid an annual stipend to serve as chair, another testament to the widely-held view of teachers as professionals. The committees themselves were comprised of representatives from each schools. Mr. Davis mentioned that he supported this process and that he wanted his school to be represented on every committee, "to protect our self-interest, if nothing else." It was important to understand, Mr. Havens suggested, "that these are not textbook committees. They don't adopt materials; they write curriculum."

The net result of the efforts of these committees was a broad-based, very general curriculum, often a set of goals or standards. Ms. Innisbrook, director of staff development and coordinator of gifted programs, conveyed the role of these curricula in discussing reading in the district:

> There are no district-wide policies or district mandates that say teachers will teach reading in a certain way. There is a charge that our students will be taught to read, but how that is accomplished is determined by the teachers.... There is a curriculum that has general objectives related to reading, standards one would find anywhere.
>
> Ms. Innisbrook, 1/19/89

Dr. Gage also explained the district's approach to curriculum:

> [I]t's more of a philosophy than a set of things to teach. Our district curriculum does not produce courses of study. Teachers, together or alone, produce courses of study consistent with the district curriculum. . . . So it makes sense to talk of a school curriculum or even a classroom curriculum. . . . We might identify areas, goals, and even choices of materials, but we never identify any particular set of materials as our curriculum.
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

Indeed, when we mentioned that one teacher said that to start the year off, she took a look at the curriculum, and then picked out goals she would try to emphasize in her first year, his reaction was, "Wow! That's exactly how we want to see those used."

The translation of the district curriculum into classroom practice seemed to capture the essence of this shared decision-making model. Mr. Havens discussed his expectations about classroom implementation:

> With few exceptions, the materials through which students and teachers encounter the content is a matter of school, and often individual teacher, choice. And in regard to method of presentation or coverage, I would say that choice is almost completely left to individual teachers.
>
> Mr. Havens, 1/23/89

This did not mean that district administrators did not try to influence teachers' choices. They did. But they invariably invited, rather than mandated, participation in a new practice, innovation, or program:

> Almost nothing here comes from the top. We by and large put things out there and encourage people to use it. . . . If you talk about mandating things, nobody is ever required, but we will make it clear that research supports a certain practice. . . .
>
> Ms. Innisbrook, 1/19/89

Dr. Gage explained this "encouragement" by noting that, from time to time, administrators from central office gave teachers certain kinds of materials or apparatus to encourage them, for example, to try a new approach to teaching science or mathematics:

> Each school has its own budget. But when we adopt a new curriculum, we have to provide the new materials. . . . For example, we are giving schools some common geography materials, and in math, there is a common set of manipulatives everyone has.
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

Principals also seemed similarly committed to decentralized decision making. Mr. Jarvis, from Alpha II, for example, explained that "All certified staff, full and part-time (including me), are involved in the decision-making process. Some people can choose not to participate in this process. No one, including me, has veto power over a staff decision." In discussing teacher prerogatives, he went on to say, "Most instructional type decisions are made at the classroom level. Definitely material-type decisions are made 100% by the classroom teachers."

Mr. Davis was also explicit about the model:

> We do it as a total staff. We have a specific model; it's called shared decision-making. Two meetings a month are reserved for making total building decisions. It's not a time for announcements and the like. I publish an agenda, and attendance is optional. But if you don't come, you've lost your chance for input. We discuss issues, develop proposals, discuss them, call for a vote, and if more than two staff vote against a proposal, it is defeated. All regular and special teachers, aides, the secretary (we used to include the custodian) are members. I get one vote. We make two kinds of decisions: decisions that affect the entire school, and what decisions to allocate to subgroups within the school, such as the Grade 1-2 staff.
>
> Mr. Davis, 1/24/89

In Alpha, change appeared to result from response to invitations to participate in some attractive new endeavor rather than from a top-down mandate. Materials decisions, for example, were the prerogative of individual teachers. Dr. Gage, the associate superintendent, provided a rationale for this policy:

> [Curricular decisions] ought to be part of a conscious, well-designed curriculum. There is a false economy of standardization. . .you can bet your bottom dollar that in a school where the truck drives up on the first day of school and unloads all of the textbooks, they'll stay on the shelves all year. I've seen them stay on the shelves 20 years.
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

However, this commitment to shared decision making did not appear to be equivalent to a laissez-faire attitude. As Dr. Gage explained:

> We have common expectations, and the better job the district can do of establishing common expectations, the more freedom we can give to people.
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

He noted that open approaches to education required educators who possessed great organizational skill and total commitment to these common expectations. To orchestrate all the choices of students and teachers in an open setting required effective planning and organization. "If you have a curriculum with no choice," he concluded, "you don't need to be very organized as a principal or as a teacher."

Assessment

Alpha administrators took what we thought was an unconventional view of conventional assessment practices:

> We do give some standardized tests, but we try as much as possible to avoid making judgments about them. But, of course, they [other people in the community] do. We have been concerned lately with state tests where they tell us that Alpha X is the best school and Alpha Y is the worst. Not true at all!
>
> Dr. Gage, 1/25/89

The superintendent commented on the potential harm of such testing:

> The effect of testing strikes me in general as more negative than positive. I hate to keep bringing up the state test, but it is true that if the state dictates curriculum, it will be through tests. . . . I always liked the idea that they were helpful in getting a progress

> check on individuals, maybe who needed to be looked at a little more closely. Now with all this school-by-school ranking, they become out and out destructive.
>
> Mr. Havens, 1/23/89

However, the Alpha administrators did not categorically dismiss standardized and other wide-scale forms of assessment. Ms. Innisbrook, for example, saw a definite role for tests as broad standards for program evaluation or, in some cases, for individual problem identification. And some standardized tests were viewed positively. Criterion referenced tests, when developed locally and embedded in the curriculum, were valued by most of the administrators. For example, the district administered a one-on-one math test to all students at the end of grades 2 and 5. The exam was not standardized per se; rather, it was a "standardized" interview which reflected Alpha's curricular commitment to the individual. As Mr. Havens explained:

> The best way to monitor progress is the way we do it with our elementary math program. We have a set of individually administered criterion-referenced tasks that we give to kids at key points. That system allows us to keep track of mastery of key objectives along the way. . . .
>
> We. . .need paper and pencil measures along the way, as a matter of economy if nothing else. But they are, and ought to be, a matter of individual teacher jurisdiction.
>
> Mr. Havens, 1/23/89

Both principals echoed similar sentiments. Mr. Jarvis emphasized his commitment to the individual in arguing for a tight linkage between instruction and informal teacher-developed assessment:

> [A]n achievement test does not give you useful information at the individual level. Hopefully, there is a lot of informal assessment in the classroom that does affect instruction.
>
> Mr. Jarvis, 2/28/89

Mr. Davis laid out the same set of themes--the individual, teacher control of assessment, and the close assessment-instruction match--in this statement:

> I think it fits in best at the classroom and student level. I hope that teachers can develop one-to-one measures that can be used to decide common needs that students have that they can then do something about.
>
> Mr. Davis, 1/24/89

As the superintendent, Mr. Havens argued, "the specific situation should determine the specific form of assessment."

What We Came to Understand

James Heap (1987) talks about the "news" in qualitative research; there seemed to be three particularly newsworthy findings in Alpha:

1. Vision and philosophy played a central role in conceptualizing curriculum at all levels within the district.

2. The focus seemed to be on the individual--teacher and/or student; in fact, the single philosophical principle undergirding their entire curriculum development and assessment process seemed to be that individuals possess individual freedom of choice and, hence, bear responsibility for their own thoughts and actions.

3. Decisions were made as close to their level of implementation as possible.

We undertook this study in order to understand the relationship between assessment and instruction. And, as noted in the introduction to these case studies, we wanted to situate both assessment and instruction within the context of decision making. In Alpha, however, it soon became apparent that the salient context was not a specific decision-making model but, instead was the philosophy that permeated the district. The basic tenet of the philosophy was that, ultimately, individuals, by virtue of their individual freedom of choice, were responsible for their own thoughts and actions. An assumption accompanying the philosophy was that schools were inherently social institutions. And it was the social nature of schooling that required people to work together by ceding individual freedom and sharing responsibility wherever and whenever it was in their best interest to do so. Ms. Clark, one of the teachers from Alpha I, expressed it this way:

> [T]here's a philosophical base to curriculum in this district. . .we want to operate on a continuous progress model and we want to individualize as much as possible. And that's a fundamental decision that was arrived at through lots of discussions among staff with administration.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

There were several consequences that followed from this philosophy of individual choice and responsibility. First, individual teachers and administrators had to commit themselves to a shared decision-making model in order to work within the district; and, as our earlier data overwhelmingly demonstrate, shared decision making truly operated by design within Alpha. In discussing her principal, Ms. Clark conveyed quite succinctly this whole melange of goals and values:

> [He] believes, very much in hiring staff that are committed to the district philosophy [of shared decision-making] and to the building philosophy of pupil progress, of a multi-age approach to teaching, of fostering independence, and self-learning in children. So he actively searches for staff members who are like that. He actively supports staff members who are willing to experiment, and risk, and fail, and go back and try again.
>
> Ms. Clark, 1/20/89

Second, teachers and administrators also had to be willing to apply the same principles, as much as possible, to students; we found several themes and practices consistent with a focus on individual students: flexible grouping, continuous progress plans, a clear preference for teacher-generated over standardized or pre-packaged assessment.

Third, individual, even idiosyncratic, visions of individual teachers were to be not only tolerated, but celebrated. Everyone expected between classroom variability within the bounds of broad commitment to a focus on individual students; everyone assumed that teachers made educational and assessment decisions that were philosophically consistent with their personal visions.

We came away from the district with a sense that both teachers and administrators valued the opportunities afforded by being a member of the Alpha community. Teachers seemed sensitive to and appreciative of the amount of support they received and of the way decisions were made in the district.

We also sensed that Alpha educators were aware that their system was a fragile one, that it operated on trust, and that it needed to be protected:

> I think that its a matter of trust. . . . It'll only succeed if everyone's aware of what's necessary to keep it going and that is a constant evaluation of where we are, how we're doing, what is succeeding, what isn't. Not just assuming that new people coming in will know how to operate. It's a learning process.
>
> For me, my life--when I walk into this room--is my other life and it has to be just as good and enriching, and I have to feel I'm making a contribution. Otherwise I couldn't come. . .this is a place where solutions can be found and I have faith in kids and in fellow colleagues. I think that's important. Some are not as fortunate to have a wide variety of experience before they walk into this situation in order to appreciate what they have. Some think that's its a given, but it isn't a given, and when you find it you want to protect it and keep it going. I think that's very important.
>
> Ms. Gough, 1/20/89

Alpha educators also seemed to be aware of the constant need for re-evaluation. One administrator, for example, noted that he felt one of the short-comings of the reading curriculum was that there were some children who "fell through the cracks"; children who had low skills, but not too low. He noted that teachers and administrators, working together, would try to address that problem as they met next year to revise the reading curriculum. For teachers, students, and administrators in Alpha, self-evaluation seemed a constant that drove all action. Ms. Beck perhaps spoke for all the Alpha educators when she said: "Every other year we are refining things. . .we're never quite 'there,' I guess it is an attitude."

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Table 1

Demographic Data for Alpha

	Total Enrollment K-6	Average Class Size	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Native American	% Low Income	Student Mobility Rate	% Non-Promoted
Alpha I	542	27	80.4	15.7	1.5	2.4	0.0	25.5	16.5%	1.3
Alpha II	552	26	86.1	10.9	0.7	2.4	0.0	23.6	12.6%	2.2
District Average		25	71.3	20.3	1.3	7.0	0.1	32.7	23.6%	1.7

Source: 1988 State Report Cards

Figure 1. Uses of Assessment: Teachers' Perspectives

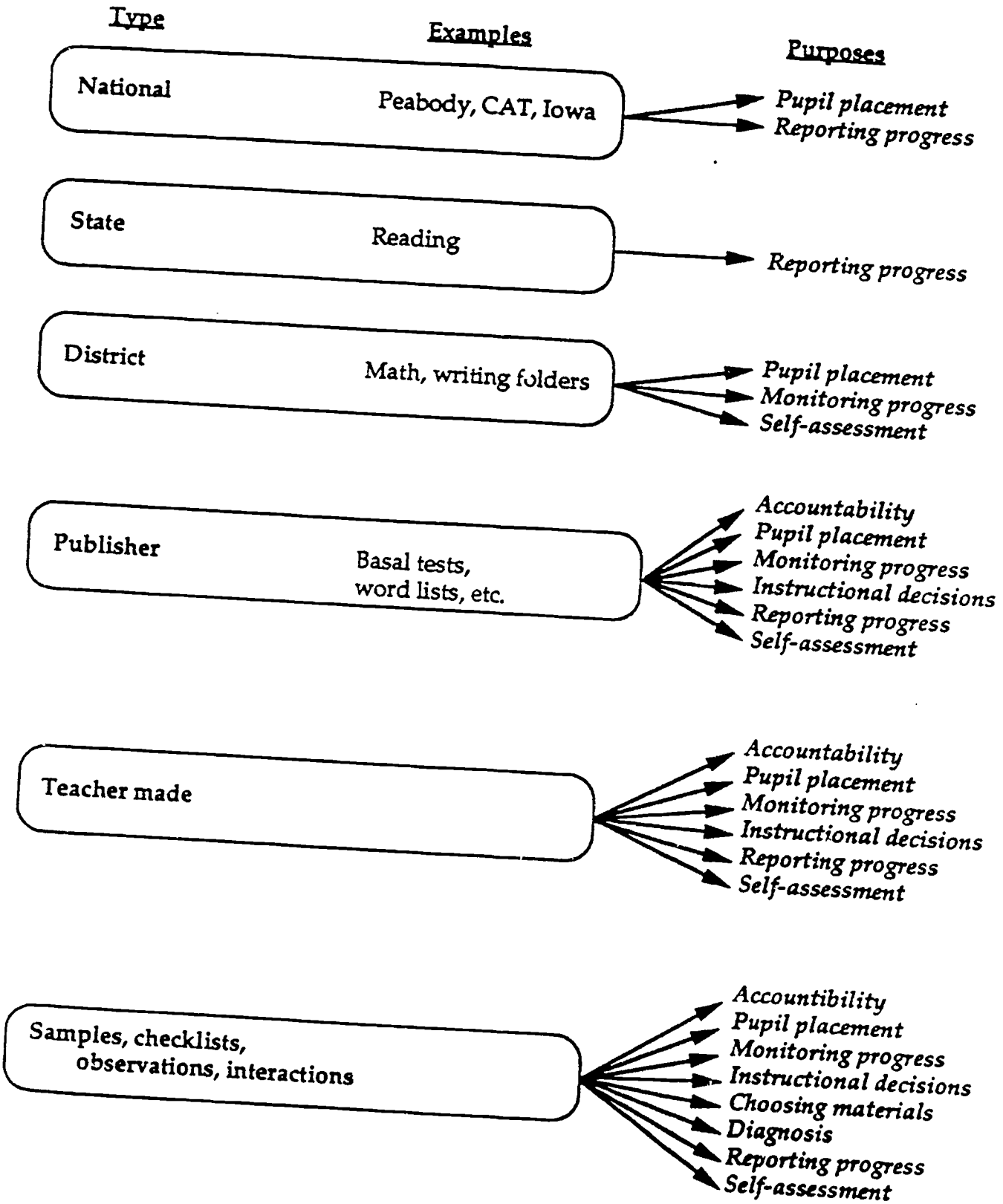
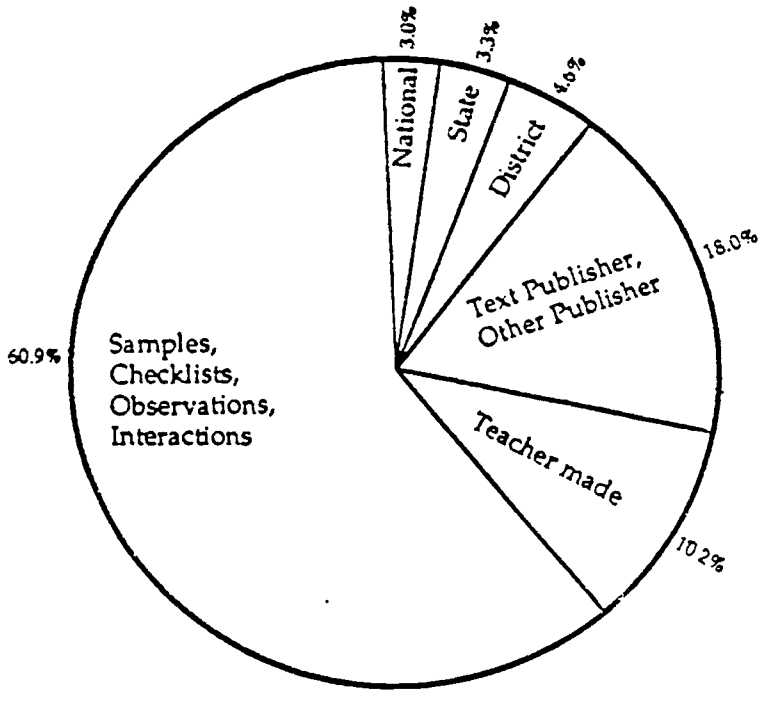


Figure 2. Approximate amounts of teacher talk, by type of assessment (in lines):



		% of Talk
National	52 lines	3.0%
State	57 lines	3.3%
District	79 lines	4.6%
Text Publisher, Other Publisher	311 lines	18.0%
Teacher Made	176 lines	10.2%
Samples, Checklists, Observations, Interactions	1,052 lines	60.9%

Appendix A

University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign

Center for the Study of Reading

174 Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, IL 61820
USA

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An announcement about a proposed research project at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

A group of us at the Center for the Study of Reading have recently been involved in research on assessment. In addition to our work with the state-wide assessment here in Illinois, we have also been studying the role of reading assessment in schools nationally; for example, we have recently completed an extensive national survey to try to better understand the relationship between reading assessment and instruction in our nation's schools.

As a follow up to that broad survey, we are interested in trying to understand the same assessment-instruction relationship from a much more "contextualized" perspective--by working with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and policy-makers to understand how that relationship works in "their" school(s). So we are designing a national study, with four to six districts in Illinois and a like number from outside the state. In each district we would like to select two schools and four classrooms (two per school) to work with more intensively.

We would talk with administrators, school board members, parents, teachers, students and support personnel in order to understand decision making from a variety of perspectives. In addition, we'd like to spend a goodly part of each of 4-8 school days, over the next four months, observing two teachers in each school. We want to understand the kinds of decisions they make on a daily basis and how they use a variety of formal and informal assessment practices to make those decisions. So we would not only observe but also talk with them about those observations.

We see this research as an opportunity for us to better understand classroom practice and teacher decision-making, particularly from the perspective of the data teachers use and how they use it to make those decisions. We see this as an opportunity for the teachers, schools, and districts who get involved to better understand their own practices in the context of how other teachers, schools, and districts approach these same issues. Our intent is to create an environment in which everyone involved has something to learn and benefit from. We would like our cooperating teachers and other school personnel to participate as fully as they would like--perhaps meeting with us to discuss findings and, if they so desire, to work with us as we seek to share findings and insights with a broader audience.

For those who will participate only in an interview, the time commitment is modest, perhaps an hour per person at the outside. For the two teachers per school with whom we work, it is a different story. We realize that 4-8 days of being observed and talking with observers is time-consuming and puts additional demands on professionals whose time is already highly taxed. We realize too that the invitation to become learners in a cooperative venture may seem more attractive to us than to busy professionals. We are hoping, though, that some teachers will see this as an opportunity and work with us to eliminate the research/practice division that so often hinders communication between university and public school educators. Frankly, we do not think we can ever really understand the assessment-instruction link without seeing it happen in classrooms and then having the opportunity to reflect on decisions we observed with the teachers who made them.

In exchange for this help, we can offer these incentives:

- Each participating school will receive a narrative report of decision-making/assessment practices in their school.
- Each participating school and district will receive a copy of our synthesis of the 8-12 sites with whom we work.
- We will hold working sessions so that educators from both the university and the public school can work together to understand and share the implications of our case studies.
- We will also secure tuition and fee for participating teachers.
- The principal investigator is willing to volunteer to work with any school or district level curriculum or assessment planning committees to the degree that they would like his involvement.

This is an exciting time to be involved in education. We think this assessment research offers an opportunity for school and university to work together and to make a difference in the lives of teachers, researchers and children.

We hope you will accept our invitation to become involved.

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Champaign, IL 61820

Appendix B

Interview Codes

Slot 1
Talking About

a. Self
b. Superintendent
c. Assistant Super.
d. Board Member
e. Staff Devl. (person)
f. Consultant
g. Principal
h. Teacher
i. Student
j. Parent
k. State
l. District
m. Administration
n. Staff Dev. (program)
o. Decision Making
p. Curriculum
q. Instruction
r. Assessment
s. Discipline
t. Materials
u. Classroom
v. School
w. Committees
x. Town
y PTA
aa. Asst. Principle
ab. Social Worker
ac. Education
ad. Budget
af. Salesman

Slot 2
Type

21 Philosophy
22 Policy
23 Practice

Slot 3
Source

301 Mandate
302 Board of Ed.
303 Superintendent
304 Principal
305 Colleague
306 Staff Development
307 Book
308 Teacher Education
309 Personal Experience
310 Experience as a student
311 Teaching Experience
312 Intuition
313 Can't Identify
314 State
315 Professional Meeting
316 Reflection
317 Source
318 Asst. Super.

Slot 4
Control

401 Self
402 Cooperative
403 Committee
404 Teacher
405 Principal
406 School
407 District
408 State
409 Student
410 Aide
411 Superintendent
412 Asst. Super.
413 PTA
414 Union
415 Ad
416 Board
417 Parent

Slot 5
Participation

51 Mandatory
52 Voluntary

Slot 6
Types of Assess.

601 National
602 State
603 District
604 Text Publisher
605 Other Publisher
606 Teacher Made
607 Samples
608 Checklist
609 Informal
610 Dynamic

Slot 7
Uses/Role of Assess.

701 Accountability
702 Program Evaluation
703 Teacher Evaluation
704 Pupil Placement
705 Reporting Pupil Progress
706 Monitor Pupil Progress
707 Choosing Materials
708 Instructional Decisions
709 Diagnosis

Observation Codes

Slot 1
Task Definition

1 Assessment
2 Behavior Management
3 Classroom Acitivty
4 Planning/ Schedule
5 Non-Academic

Slot 2
Grouping

201 Whole/T
202 Small/T
203 Indiv/T
204 Whole/NoT
205 Small/NoT
306 Indiv/NoT

Slot 3
Content

301 Social Studies
302 Science
303 Math
304 Literature
305 Reading
306 Writing
307 Grammar
308 Spelling
309 Phonics
310 Vocabulary
311 Music
312 P.E.
313 Drama
314 Art
315 Other
316 Health

Slot 4
Materials

400 None
401 Text
402 Basal
403 Trade Book
404 Workbook/sheet
405 Blank Paper
406 Kit
407 Manipulative
408 Computer
409 Tape Recorder
410 Other Gadgets
411 Art Supplies
412 Chalkboard
413 Homemade Book
414 Reference Material
415 Test
416 Other
417 Film/Movie

Slot 5
Type of Activity

(Use only with S[illegible] 1 #3)
501 Telling
502 TI/SR
503 Scaffold
504 Discussion

Slot 6
Type of Assessment

(Use only with Slot 1 #1)
601 National
602 State
603 District
604 Txt Publisher
605 Other Publisher
606 Teacher made
607 Samples
608 Checklist
609 Informal
610 Dynamic