Early Literacy Walkthrough, Planning and Discussion Guide

All students need high-quality, differentiated, culturally responsive and sustaining literacy instruction during the school day. Educators can use this set of guiding questions — individually or in combination - for classroom walkthroughs, lesson planning and peer observations. The tools can be adapted depending on the context of use.

The purpose of these tools is to help educators and leaders notice teaching and learning when it's happening, celebrate what's going well and identify areas for improvement.

The walkthrough, planning and discussion questions are posed under three categories: Tasks, Materials, and Classroom Climate.

The following cross-cutting characteristics of a K–5 literacy classroom are essential for high-quality literacy education and are foundational to the questions in this noticing tool.

Student belonging as a foundation for learning

As they engage in literacy activities, teachers and students reflect upon their identities and learn about the identities of others. Uplifting student voice and building interpersonal skills are central to the function of the classroom community. Teachers and students participate in a classroom where multiculturalism and multilingualism is affirmed and integrated throughout the school day.

A focus on reading, writing, speaking and listening

Literacy (reading, writing, speaking and listening) is embedded in all learning activities: children are explicitly taught foundational literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, as well as comprehension, vocabulary building, fluency and critical thinking skills. Oral language at home and at school supports all literacy learning. Writing is integrated throughout the day in multiple subject areas.

Culturally and linguistically responsive, asset-based instruction

Educators ensure that student and family knowledge, stories, languages and cultural assets are reflected in the classroom environment, in instruction, and in curricular materials. Educators maintain high literacy expectations for all students and provide academic and linguistic scaffolds so that all students can access standards-based content.

Five Noticing Tools

The question sets below can be used individually — to hone in on a specific area of instruction — or in combination:

Oral Language

Tasks and activities, teaching and learning roles

- What opportunities are provided for students to talk to each other in pairs and in groups, both socially and for academic purposes?

- What evidence do we see of students talking about and playing with language and learning new vocabulary?

- What activities support students speaking, listening and responding directly and listening to each other?

- How do teachers model and provide scaffolding or opportunities for using different languages and dialects?

- How are opportunities to practice sharing, thinking and listening embedded in reading or writing activities?

Materials, resources and physical space

- How is the physical classroom (chairs, tables, rugs) organized to support student to student discussions and storytelling?

- In what ways do classroom resources support narrative and storytelling in home languages, dialects and cultures?

- How are the walls and classroom displays used to support oral language learning and vocabulary development?

Student groupings, student talk and classroom climate

- How are students grouped in order to talk and interact throughout the day?

- What opportunities do students have to talk about what they are reading or writing?

- What evidence do we see of a climate of talking and interacting respectfully?

- What opportunities do students have to learn about and reflect upon their identities and identities of others?

- What evidence do we see of students voicing their opinions, asking meaningful questions or influencing the trajectory of their learning?

Foundational Skills

For reference, foundational skills include: phonics (the knowledge that sounds correspond to each letter or group of letters within a language), print concepts (the understanding that print is speech written down), phonological awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds and sound patterns in spoken words), word recognition, the alphabetic principle (the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between written letters and spoken sounds), and fluency (accuracy, automacy and expression when reading).

Tasks and activities, teaching and learning roles

- How does the daily literacy block support learning of foundational skills? Is at least 25% of the K–2 literacy block dedicated to foundational skills instruction and practice?

- How are students receiving instruction on all foundational skill sets?

- How does the pacing of the daily literacy block support differentiation, including extra time for students needing support?

- In what ways is foundational skills instruction guided by a systematic scope and sequence?

- What steps are being taken to ensure students receive daily foundational skills instruction and opportunities for practice, both during and outside of literacy lessons?

- How do teachers explicitly teach and provide scaffolding for foundational skills?

- What opportunities are provided for students to practice foundational skills?

- How are students' home languages and dialects leveraged as assets during foundational skill instruction?

- How are foundational skills applied to reading decodable texts?

- How are foundational skills integrated into reading comprehension and writing activities?

- How are students needing additional support given both extra practice and also access to grade level standards?

Materials, resources and physical space

- What high-quality instructional materials are provided for students to learn phonics, print concepts and phonological awareness? (See the ODE approved list of high-quality instructional materials.)

- How are the walls and classroom displays used to support learning the alphabetic principle and word recognition?

- What materials are provided for students to learn foundational skills in groups, pairs or independently?

Student grouping, student talk and classroom climate

- How do ongoing assessments provide information about whether a student's skills are progressing or not progressing?

- How is the teacher using whole group and small group instruction to support the development of foundational skills? How does this grouping support learning?

- How is the teacher using formative assessment to craft flexible, data driven small groups for foundational skills learning?

- What factors are considered when creating meaningful student groups for instruction that support the skills of multilingual learners? (e.g., student age, language proficiency level, educational background, primary/secondary language)

- What evidence do we see of a climate of growth mindset and "we are all learning at our own pace" around foundational skills? What evidence do we see of students being celebrated for persevering through difficulties?

- How does foundational skill instruction support the skills of multilingual learners with English and with students' native languages or dialects?

- How are students using evidence of their learning to set their own goals, identify skills they need to practice and celebrate their own success?

- How are families included in the opportunities to practice and celebrate progress?

Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary and Background Knowledge

Tasks and activities, teaching and learning roles

- How does the daily literacy block support daily listening to, reading, thinking, talking and writing about texts?

- How much time is allocated for reading texts connected to their learning?

- What opportunities are provided for students to learn about reading in an integrated approach that includes foundational skills, background knowledge, vocabulary, oral language, reading comprehension and writing instruction?

- What evidence do we see of students building background knowledge in culturally responsive (and sustaining) ways?

- What activities support students to create connections among texts, content and personal experience?

- How do teachers model, question and provide scaffolding to use reading comprehension strategies connected to a text?

- How does the teacher use questions and tasks, both oral and written, that are text-specific and that address the analytical thinking required by the grade level standards?

- How are read alouds of complex texts used for students to engage with reading, building meaning and learning new vocabulary?

- What opportunities do students have to practice reading comprehension strategies connected to a text, on their own or with a partner?

- What evidence do we see of explicit vocabulary instruction?

- How are students' home languages and dialects leveraged for learning new English words?

- What opportunities do students have to practice new vocabulary (through speaking, reading, writing or games)?

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Materials, resources and physical space

- What high-quality instructional materials are provided for students to support reading comprehension and vocabulary development? (See the ODE approved list of high-quality instructional materials)

- How do classroom books, texts and materials reflect the inclusion of diverse content and authors (for example, a variety of races, ethnicities, cultures, languages, dialects, traditions, religions, histories, communities, genders, abilities and/or family structures)?

- How is the classroom organized and arranged to support reading for enjoyment?

- How are the walls and classroom displays used to reinforce reading strategies, vocabulary and content knowledge?

Student grouping, student talk and classroom climate

- How does grouping or pairing support students at different points in their learning progressions as readers?

- What opportunities do students have to talk about texts utilizing academic language that reflect grade level standards?

- What evidence do we see of students talking and asking questions about each other's reading and thinking, in order to clarify or improve their understanding?

- What evidence do we see of a classroom community of readers and writers that engages all learners' experiences and perspectives?

- What evidence do we see of a climate of growth mindset and "we are all learning at our own pace" around reading comprehension? What evidence do we see of students being celebrated for persevering through difficulties?

- How are families included in the opportunities to practice and celebrate progress?

Writing Instruction

Tasks and activities, teaching and learning roles

- How much is time is allocated for writing each day connected to grade level standards? How does the daily literacy block support writing?

- How do teachers explicitly teach about writing, model the writing process and provide scaffolding as needed?

- What evidence do we see of students writing, sharing writing, and giving/ receiving feedback about writing toward clearly articulated goals reflecting grade level standards?

- How do teachers provide opportunities for writing different genres or text types?

- How are the expectations for writing in different genres communicated to students (e.g., through rubrics or other resources)? What opportunities do students have to compare their writing to an established rubric?

- How does formative assessment impact writing instruction, revision and editing?

- What opportunities are provided for students to write in science, social studies, math and other content areas?

- How is writing used for articulating ideas, enhancing language and reading comprehension skills, and promoting foundational literacy?

- What opportunities do students have to learn about and practice the mechanics of writing (e.g., spelling, handwriting)?

- What opportunities do students have to connect oral language to written language?

- What opportunities do students have to write for authentic audiences and real-world contexts?

- In what ways are students experiencing choice and autonomy in their writing?

- How is writing for enjoyment both modeled and supported?

- What opportunities do students have to write in ways that affirm their identities and lived experiences?

Materials, resources and physical space

- What high-quality instructional materials are provided for students to learn how to write? (see ODE's curriculum adoption criteria)

- In what ways do classroom resources (paper, pencils, art materials, technology) support the writing process, storytelling and story writing?

- How are mentor texts used to support writing? What types of texts are used?

- How is the classroom organized and arranged to support students' writing and sharing of their writing (in pairs or independently)?

- How are the walls and classroom displays used to celebrate students' writing, support the writing process or provide exemplars of different types and forms of writing?

- How do the walls and classroom displays and materials reflect the diversity of writers in the world?

Student grouping, student talk and classroom climate

- How are students grouped or paired for writing? How does this grouping support learning?

- What opportunities do students have to talk about their writing?

- What evidence do we see of an engaged community of readers and writers that is culturally responsive (and sustaining) and tailored to meet the diverse needs of students?

- What opportunities do students have for taking risks, receiving feedback, editing and making revisions to their writing?

- In what ways are students encouraged to express themselves, share their perspectives and reflect on their own and others' writing?

- What evidence do we see of a respectful climate of sharing writing and supporting other writers?

- How are families included in the opportunities to practice writing and to celebrate student authors?

Formative Assessment

Tasks and activities, teaching and learning roles

- In what ways are literacy tasks rigorous, authentic and relevant?

- How are literacy tasks designed to ensure they provide evidence of student learning?

- In what ways are students given opportunities to set literacy goals, track and celebrate their progress and revisit their goals?

- In what ways is the assessment culture in the classroom focused on students' ownership of their own learning and opportunities to share what they know and can do?

- How do teachers use standards, learning goals and success criteria to guide their feedback to students?

- In what ways are students taught to use learning goals and success criteria to guide their learning during literacy lessons?

- How do teachers support students to engage in self-assessment and peer feedback, e.g., through explicit instruction, opportunities for practice and structured protocols?

- What evidence do we see of teachers using formative assessment information to make decisions about instruction and feedback?

- What evidence can we see of students independently accessing a range of reading materials based on their own self-assessment?

Materials, resources and physical space

- How is the classroom structured to support students to independently access resources based on their self-assessment and peer feedback?

- What evidence can we see of students independently accessing a range of reading materials based on their own self-assessment?

- What classroom routines and structures support students to carry out assessment processes in predictable ways in the classroom (e.g, in quiet self-reflection zones and/or feedback corners)?

Student grouping, student talk and classroom climate

- How do teachers and students work together to create a classroom climate based on trust, respect and mutual responsibility in support of one another's learning?

- What evidence do we see of structured opportunities for students to participate in small group discussions and reflect on their participation?

- What supports enable students to reach out to one another to ask for feedback and benefit from each other's expertise?

- How are students invited to develop and evaluate their literacy learning habits of focus, engagement, appetite for challenge and stamina for learning?

- How are families included in the opportunities to practice and celebrate progress?