

## Achieving Balance in Reading Assessment

*What kinds of assessment can make students better readers?*

This is an era of great promise and great challenge for reading assessment. Our evolving knowledge of reading and reading assessment helps us conceptualize students' reading growth and determine appropriate assessments to measure and describe that growth. An array of reading assessment materials and procedures, including teacher questioning, performance assessment, portfolio assessment, checklists, reading inventories, and quizzes and tests, can help us understand our students' reading growth and our teaching effectiveness. Each can contribute to an accurate analysis of our teaching success in reading.

Yet the promise of reading assessment comes with the challenge created by the current focus on single, high-stakes test scores. Federal law now mandates that our students' reading achievement be measured by annual high-stakes tests. These tests garner school resources at the expense of reading assessments that provide more varied information about our teaching and our students' learning (Afflerbach, 2005). This can create an imbalance in reading assessment—an imbalance that must be corrected for the work of students and teachers to be truly useful in bolstering students' reading growth.

This monograph describes the sense of balance that is a hallmark of successful reading assessment and successful reading programs. I'll examine the important work that must be done in balancing:

- assessment of reading processes with assessment of reading products
- assessment of reading skills and strategies with assessment of how students use what they understand from reading
- assessment of cognitive factors with assessment of affective reading factors
- formative reading assessment with summative reading assessment
- reading assessment done to or for students with reading assessment done with and by students
- demands for teacher and school accountability with opportunities for professional development in reading assessment



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## Balancing Assessment of Reading Processes and Reading Products

All assessment involves making inferences about students' growth and achievement. Using reading assessment information, we reason about the extent of students' reading development. We make inferences about this development from our assessment of the processes and products of reading. Reading processes are those skills and strategies that readers use when they decode, determine

vocabulary meaning, read fluently, and comprehend. **Process-oriented reading assessment** is focused on the skills and strategies that students use to construct meaning from text. Such assessment allows teachers to assess students *as they learn*. For example, if you observe a student applying phonics knowledge to sound out the *ch* consonant blend, you are assessing that student as he or she uses decoding processes. When you observe a student re-reading a sentence to clarify the meaning of the sentence, you are assessing that student's use of a metacognitive strategy. Our process assessment helps us determine what

skills and strategies are working—or not working—as the student attempts to construct meaning. Such reading process assessments can be accomplished with various tools, including reading inventories and miscue analyses.

**Product-oriented reading assessment** provides an *after-the-fact account* of student reading achievement. The information provided by product assessments can help us determine students' achievement in relation to important reading benchmarks, standards, and goals. Typical reading product assessments include quizzes, tests, and questions relating to students' comprehension of text. When we examine test scores, we must make large backwards inferences about what worked (or didn't work) as students read. And we must make further inferences about how our instruction contributed (or didn't contribute) to the students' achievement.

Product assessments are relatively limited in their ability to provide details about what students can and can't do as they read. This limitation stems from two important factors: one is the time lapse between the product of a reading assessment and the reading processes that created the product, and the other is the time lapse between the administration of a product assessment and when the results are available. An apt analogy might be trying to determine *why* a basketball team won or lost a game by examining the final score. Certainly the final score is important, but it tells us nothing of the means by which it was achieved. There is very little for us to go on if we are interested in gaining instructionally useful information from the assessment.

## Balancing Assessment of Reading Skills with Assessment of How Students Use What They Read

Students must comprehend the texts they read. Students must also be able to *use* the information they learn from reading in order to perform reading-related tasks. Most current reading assessment focuses on skills and strategies, or the means by which meaning is constructed. We assess how well students can decode words with consonant blends and how well they use intonation as they

“Process assessments help us determine what skills and strategies are working—or not working.”

read orally. We assess students' ability to determine or construct main ideas and to locate or identify supporting details in texts. We assess how well students can summarize the texts they read in order to determine how well they construct meaning. Each of these assessments focuses on reading skills and strategies.

In many reading assessment scenarios, students read to answer teacher questions or to do well on a quiz or test. Yet our reading instruction should always encourage students to read to understand text and to use what they understand in reading-related tasks. When students read guidelines for conducting hands-on experiments prior to science inquiry, or when they read colonists' diaries in order to create a class dramatic presentation, their reading involves two goals: to comprehend the text and to use what they comprehend. Such reading is the norm outside of the classroom—so it should be more prevalent in the classroom, too.

We need to remind ourselves that reading to answer comprehension questions occurs mostly in school settings and in formal testing situations, not in the world outside. While comprehension questions can give an accurate idea of students' ability to construct meaning from text, we must complement this type of assessment with information about how students use what they comprehend. Performance assessment, a form of authentic assessment, places students in situations involving the types of everyday reading that they do and the ways in which they use what they learned from reading.

### Balancing Assessment of Cognitive and Affective Reading Factors

A survey of currently used high-stakes assessments, early-reading screening instruments, and classroom reading assessments may suggest that all that matters in reading assessment are the reading skills and strategies that make reading comprehension possible. These materials focus almost exclusively on the cognitive development of student readers. Yet experienced classroom teachers and parents know that the ability to use reading skills and strategies does not necessarily guarantee children's reading success.

Successful readers are engaged readers. These readers are motivated to read. They identify themselves as readers, they persevere in the face of reading challenges, and they consider reading to be a vital part of their daily lives. When we think of our teaching successes, do we think only of students who learned skills and strategies under our guidance? Or do we think also of students who went from reading reluctantly to reading with enthusiasm? Of students who evolved from easily discouraged readers to readers whose motivation helped them persevere through difficult reading challenges? Of students who avoided reading at all costs who became students who learned to love reading? Certainly, we can count such students and our positive influence on them among our most worthy teaching accomplishments.

We need assessments that are capable of measuring and describing changes in students' motivation, perseverance, responses to reading success and failure, and ability to identify themselves as readers. If we take teacher accountability seriously, we need to have measures that demonstrate that professional teachers

**Teachers should consider the reasons and ways people read outside of the classroom as they assess students.**

*“Successful readers are engaged readers.”*

and superior reading programs change students' lives. Such measures do exist; they include surveys and inventories of students' reading motivation (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni, 1996), attitudes toward reading (McKenna and Kear, 1990), and reading self-concepts (Chapman and Tunmer, 1995).

### **Balancing Formative Reading Assessment and Summative Reading Assessment**

We are a society enamored with numbers. States, counties, school districts, schools, classrooms, teachers, and students are evaluated and ranked in relation to a series of summative reading assessments. These assessments report important summary information about students' reading skills and strategies. They summarize reading achievement in levels, raw scores, and percentiles that rank students against one another.

Formative assessment, in contrast, is conducted with the goal of gathering information that helps inform our instruction and improve student learning. At the heart of effective reading instruction is a teacher's detailed knowledge of each student. This knowledge is constructed through ongoing formative assessments conducted throughout the school day and the school year. A prime example of formative assessment is teacher questioning. Teachers who are adept at asking questions during instruction can use students' responses to those questions to develop a detailed sense of how well students understand the lesson and where ongoing instruction should focus. Formative assessment can be conducted through teacher observations, teacher questioning, performance assessments, portfolio assessments, and teacher evaluation of students' retellings and discussions.

### **Balancing Reading Assessment Done to or for Students with Reading Assessment Done with and by Students**

One hallmark of successful readers is their ability to monitor their reading and conduct ongoing assessments of reading progress (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995). However, many students move through school with reading assessments done to them or for them. A result is that many students think of assessment as a "black box" (Black and William, 1998). Student quizzes, tests, and written reports are handed in, evaluated, graded, and returned. Students earn scores but gain no understanding of how assessment works. Students then learn little or nothing about doing reading assessments for themselves. Across the grades, there are countless lost opportunities for students to learn to conduct reading assessments on their own.

We must strive to provide opportunities for students to learn the value of self-assessment and the means to assess themselves in accurate and useful ways. This can be a long and challenging process. A good start is modeling simple and straightforward assessment questions and guiding students to ask and answer them independently. For example, asking yourself "Does that make sense?" and "How do I know?" can help set young readers on a healthy path to self-assessment. As the teacher, you should not abdicate your responsibility to conduct an array of valuable classroom-based reading assessments; rather, you

**Students who learn to assess themselves can become more independent readers.**

can inform students about some of your assessment strategies so that they can use them as well. If students never learn how to perform self-assessments, how will they ever become truly independent readers?

### **Balancing Demands for Teacher and School Accountability with Opportunities for Professional Development**

Accomplished teachers and effective schools take accountability to heart each and every day. Teachers demonstrate this concern for accountability in the care and professionalism with which they work with their students. Teacher and school accountability has recently become even more important with today's focus on high-stakes testing. The costs involved in developing, buying, administering, and scoring assessments are considerable. Unfortunately, the school funds spent on high-stakes tests are taken from school budgets that are otherwise limited. This means that money spent on tests cannot be spent on initiatives that would help teachers inform their instruction through professional training. In fact, each kind of assessment described in this monograph calls for teachers' professional development in assessment.

Teachers can become experts in classroom assessment when they are supported by their administrators and school districts (Johnston, 1987). This support helps teachers develop and refine the formative and process-oriented assessments that are so critical to daily successes in the classroom. Regular and detailed assessments provide information that helps teachers recognize and utilize "teachable moments." These daily successes add up to the kind of accomplished teaching and learning that help students and schools succeed on accountability tests. Teachers and students cannot become successful on accountability tests through simply *testing*—this success can only be earned by the hard work and support that fuel skillful classroom assessment and instruction. Professional development can help teachers learn and use the reading assessment materials and procedures that will best influence daily teaching and learning. Thus, there needs to be a balance between the call for teacher and school accountability and the means to help teachers and schools maintain this accountability.

### **Summary**

Balance is necessary for effective reading assessment, and effective reading assessment is necessary to the success of a reading program. Focusing exclusively on high-stakes tests can create a series of imbalances that have negative effects on our teaching and on our students' learning. Using the varied reading assessment strategies described here, however, can help us meet the challenge of demonstrating adequate yearly progress. We are not wanting for descriptions and details of how classroom-based reading assessment helps our teaching and how our teaching helps student readers develop. As teachers, we are challenged to provide excellent instruction for each and every student. Efforts to establish a balanced and effective plan for reading assessment will help us meet this challenge.

*“Detailed assessments help teachers recognize and utilize ‘teachable moments.’”*

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