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READING ASSESSMENT— THE THIRD DIMENSION

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Assessing a student's progress in reading should be an integral part of every reading program. Most teachers use standardized or informal tests for the diagnosis and evaluation of reading achievement; however, a third means of assessment is available to teachers. This article is intended to help educators legitimize this often ignored method of assessing reading behavior and evaluating reading performance.

Standardized Tests—One method for evaluating reading performance is labeled "standardized." Educators who rely primarily on this method of assessment use standardized tests of all sorts and varieties. These tests are generally made available by publishers who spend a great deal of money developing, refining, advertising, and marketing the tests.

The technical manuals of standardized tests provide norms, reliability coefficients, item analyses, various types of validity, and the like. The tests appear to be very scientific and exact, thereby providing the educator with a false sense of security about the results. For example, a serious misuse of a reading survey test is to equate a grade level score with a graded reading text. It is not correct to assume that a grade score of 4.2 on a standardized reading survey test means that the student should be placed in a fourth-grade reader. The tests were not intended for such a purpose; yet they are regularly misused in this manner.

The results from diagnostic tests are also frequently misused. Perhaps the most common misuse is to base instruction on the strengths and weaknesses suggested by subtest scores. In some cases, the technical manuals of diagnostic tests offer little or no evidence of subtest validity. In addition, the subtests of some diagnostic tests correlate so highly with each other that the *diagnostic* value of any one subtest is of dubious quality.

Educators should also realize that most diagnostic and survey tests fragment the reading process. Such fragmentation may yield false conclusions about the "skills" the student needs to master in order to become an efficient and effective reader. Despite many limitations of survey and diagnostic tests, a diverse group of professionals persists in using them for the evaluation of overall reading achievement and the diagnosis of specific strengths and weaknesses in reading.

Informal Tests—Informal tests are another way of assessing and monitoring reading progress. They generally lack scientific information about test construction, validity, and reliability; however, professionals who design these tests usually exert reasonable efforts to establish what might be termed subjective validity and reliability. While lack of statistical information must not be taken lightly, the basic nature of these tests is informal.

An informal reading inventory (IRI), perhaps the most popular informal reading test, is often constructed by a classroom teacher. The IRI is generally used to help match students with books. This match, however, is not always correct. Through daily classroom instruction, the teacher can determine whether the student needs to be given easier or harder reading material. The method many teachers use to make this decision is the third dimension to reading assessment.

IOT—For years teachers have been using another technique for assessing and monitoring reading progress; the IOT. What is the IOT? It is really a pseudo-scientific abbreviation that may help legitimize something that good teachers have always done: use observation as a means to determine whether their instruction is producing the desired results. They observe students in a variety of everyday situations. In essence, they use the inner-ocular technique (IOT).

When teachers question the validity of tests, workbook, or worksheet scores, they are probably using information that has been gathered through the IOT. In short, the data obtained from a particular assignment or test may not jibe with the bulk of the evidence that has become a subtle part of the teaching-learning process. Teachers who rely on the IOT use their observations to help make instructional decisions. These decisions, in turn, are evaluated from further use of the IOT. Instruction becomes a dynamic process that depends, to a large extent, on the day-to-day observations of the teacher.

A number of teachers, moreover, use systematic methods of recording information obtained from the IOT. They develop checklists, keep notes in folders or on file cards, and/or use other means of recording their observations so that patterns of strengths and weaknesses can be systematically determined. A number of textbooks on the teaching of reading have also provided various methods to help teachers systematize the IOT.

The main point of this article can be made with the following example. Children being taught to read must learn to recognize words. Today's enlightened teachers realize that phonics is an important word attack strategy, but other strategies must also be taught—for example, context and structural analysis. There needs to be a balance among the many methods of word attack. Without balance, the reading process may be short-circuited, resulting in ineffective reading.

In a similar vein, teachers should realize that the IOT is an important means for assessing the effectiveness of reading instruction. Standardized and informal tests should also be used. There needs to be a balance among the many methods of assessing students' reading progress. Without this balance, instruction may become misdirected, which, in turn, may work against helping students become proficient readers. To achieve the necessary balance among methods of assessment, greater attention needs to be paid to IOT. Let's legitimize IOT. Skilled use of IOT can be as valid an assessment technique as either standardized or informal tests.

All teachers observe. There's no way to avoid it. What teachers need to do is place greater credence in their observations and trust the insights that they have gained through their teaching.