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A SURVEY OF THE USE OF READING READINESS TESTS

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Reading readiness tests generally are intended to serve two purposes: (1) prediction of readiness for reading instruction and, to a degree, (2) diagnosis of deficiencies of specific skills that are prerequisites for reading. How successful are these tests in serving their purposes?

Prediction of Readiness for Reading Instruction

The authors of readiness tests don't try to answer directly the question of how well their readiness test predicts readiness for reading instruction. Instead they report correlations between performance on their reading readiness test given in the fall of first grade with performance on reading achievement tests given in the spring of first grade. The assumption is made that pupils achieving low in spring were the ones who had poor prereading skills the previous fall. Thus if the fall readiness scores correlate well with the spring achievement scores, the readiness test authors assume that their test is probably properly identifying the low-skill pupils in the fall.

Performances on readiness tests do correlate well with performances on reading achievement tests. The authors of the *Metropolitan Readiness Tests* (MRT) report correlations ranging from .58 to .73 between total performance on the MRT and performance on the *Metropolitan Achievement Test* (MAT) at the end of first grade. The authors of the *Clymer-Barrett Prereading Battery* (CBPB) report correlations ranging from .49 to .69 between total test scores on the CBPB and subtest scores on the MAT at the end of first grade. A review of the manuals of the major reading readiness tests reveals that the correlations reported above are typical.

However, even very high correlations between performance on readiness tests in the fall and performance on reading achievement tests in the spring would not be evidence that readiness tests predicted preparedness for reading instruction. According to Calfee and Venezky (1968):

A child's ability to name the letters of the alphabet or the kindergarten teacher's rating are both reliable predictors [of reading achievement]. Correlation continues to resist any efforts to be equated with causality, however. By the end of first grade, most children have learned to identify the letters of the alphabet, but many have not become satisfactory readers. Children who are not able to handle phonetic discrimination or segmentation are also likely to be poor readers. The conclusion has been drawn that such children must be taught to listen more carefully to what they hear and say. Yet pilot studies in this laboratory and the experience of

teachers with whom the writers have spoken suggest that it is difficult to explain phonetic segmentation to a child until he learns to read. (p. 102)

Isn't it likely that the children who know their letters in the beginning of first grade come from homes that stress education? For the sake of making a point, let us say that having parents who stress education is a causal factor of reading success. Those children who had parents who stressed education would have learned their letters by the time they entered first grade. However, teaching the alphabet to a kindergarten child whose parents did not care about education would not cause that child to become a reading success.

Furthermore, there is the complication of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Rosenthal and Evans (1969) suggest the possibility that teacher expectancy affects such student motivational components of performance as perseverance, independence, and feelings of competence.

Diagnosis of Deficiencies of Prerequisite Skills

Besides having the purpose of prediction of preparedness for reading instruction, readiness tests generally are intended to be used to some degree for diagnostic purposes. Most readiness tests have several subtests, each of which is designed to test a separate skill. (However, typically, readiness test authors discourage users from relying on subtest scores.) Nevertheless, there is no evidence that subtests on readiness tests are testing separate skills. On the contrary, Calfee and Venezky (1968) posit that readiness tests are actually testing two general factors, the ability to follow instructions and general language competence.

There is evidence for the claim that readiness tests are not testing independent factors. In their report on first grade reading instruction, Bond and Dykstra (1967) gave a comprehensive set of subtest intercorrelations for the *Murphy-Durrell Reading Readiness Analysis* (MDRRA). The phonemes subtest correlated .52 with the letter names subtest and .42 with the learning rate subtest; the letter names subtest correlated .31 with the learning rate subtest. The mean of these subtest intercorrelations (.42) is nearly as high as the mean of the correlations between the subtests of the MDRRA given in the fall of first grade with the subtests of the *Stanford Reading Achievement Test* given in the spring (.48).

One cannot make logically the following two claims simultaneously:

- (1) A correlation of .5 between readiness test performance in the fall and reading achievement test performance in the spring indicates valid functioning of a readiness test.
- (2) Even though the mean intercorrelation between subtests on a readiness test is .5, these subtests are measuring independent factors.

Yet readiness test authors, either explicitly or implicitly, are making similar contradictory claims.

There is another way of determining whether independent skills are

being measured by the various subtests on readiness tests. Presumably the Listening Subtest on the MRT and the Phonemes Subtest on the MDRRA are testing the same factor, i.e., auditory discrimination. These two subtests correlate .42 or .61 with correction for attenuation. Yet the Alphabet Subtest of the MRT and the Phonemes Subtest of the MDRRA, which presumably are testing different skills, correlate equally as well, i.e., .41 or .58 with correction for attenuation (Calfée & Venezky, 1968, pp. 95-96). In view of this evidence, it is fair to suggest that the subtests of various readiness tests are not measuring independent factors.

A Survey on Readiness Tests

In view of the reservations about reading readiness tests held by many authorities, this investigator considered it important to determine how extensively and for what purposes readiness tests are being used. Therefore, in March and April of 1975, a survey on readiness tests was conducted. The questions on the survey form reflected the concerns of Calfée and Venezky (1968) and Bond and Dykstra (1967). The survey form was designed by this investigator and later revised according to the suggestions of a number of reviewers. The revised survey form was sent to a stratified random sample of fifteen school districts from ten counties in New York State. The sample included districts of varying socioeconomic levels from rural, suburban, and urban areas. Respondents were reading coordinators, reading directors, reading teachers, and, in one case, a building principal. In all cases the respondent was the person assumed to have the greatest familiarity with the over-all reading program at the primary level. There was a 100% return of the survey forms.

Respondents were asked whether readiness tests were used in their districts. If the district used a readiness test, respondents were asked the names of the tests and the purposes for which the tests were used. Respondents were also asked how satisfied they were with their reading readiness screening procedures.

Of the 15 districts sampled, 13 of them used at least 1 readiness test: 5 districts used 4 tests; 3 districts used 3 tests; 1 district used 2 tests and; 4 districts used 1 test. The test named most often was the MRT (named by 8 respondents) followed by the *Gates-MacGinitie Readiness Tests* (named by 4 respondents). Altogether 73% of the respondents for these 13 districts were either totally satisfied or satisfied in the major aspects of their districts' readiness screening procedures.

Of the 13 districts that used readiness tests, all of them used the tests as one indication of preparedness for reading instruction. Respondents from 8 of the districts reported extensive or regular use of the tests to establish a cut-off point. (That is to say, children scoring below a particular point would not be given reading instruction but would be given readiness training instead.) Additionally, 9 of the respondents reported extensive or regular use of the tests for diagnosing specific skill weaknesses, a practice at variance with the stated purposes of most readiness tests. For example, in the manual for the MRT, the use of sub-tests for diagnostic purposes is discouraged. Yet of the 8 districts that used the MRT, 6 of them used it

extensively or regularly for the purpose of diagnosing specific skill weaknesses.

The data presented here suggest that readiness tests are used extensively, and that in the majority of the districts that use readiness tests, the tests are being used for the purpose of establishing a cut-off point. Calfee and Venezky (1968) would object to using readiness tests for this purpose. Their position is that it is sad that "readiness test information can be used only to delay the beginning of reading instruction by intervention of 'readiness' activities" (p. 104). MacGinitie (1969) would claim that the wrong question is being asked. He suggested that the question "What and how is the child ready to learn?" be asked rather than the question, "Is the child ready to learn to read?"

The data from this survey suggest that the majority of districts that use readiness tests may be using them extensively or regularly for the purpose of diagnosing specific skill weaknesses. Thus the majority of districts that use readiness tests may be using them inappropriately with respect to the stated purposes in the manuals.

Evidence about readiness tests needs to be disseminated among the users of these tests. The data from this survey suggest that readiness tests are being misused, even with respect to the stated purposes in the manuals. Furthermore, it is not clear that readiness tests are achieving even their stated purposes. Those who teach reading readiness should be informed about the evidence regarding readiness tests and should exercise caution in regard to interpreting readiness test scores.

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¹However, it should be noted that intelligence quotients correlate about as well as readiness test scores correlate with reading achievement test scores.