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, are available to help us best understand our students’ reading growth and our teaching effectiveness. Each can contribute to the rich description of our teaching success in reading.

The promise of reading assessment is contrasted with the challenge created by the focus on single, high-stakes test scores. Federal law now mandates that our students’ reading achievement be measured by once-a-year high-stakes tests. These tests garner attention and school resources at the expense of reading assessments that provide more regular but richer information about our teaching and our students’ learning (Afflerbach, 2005). This has the effect of causing an imbalance in reading assessment—an imbalance that must be corrected for the work of students and teachers to be fully realized and acknowledged.

This monograph has the goal of describing a series of balances that are the hallmarks of successful reading assessment and successful reading programs. The monograph examines the important work that must be done in balancing the following:

- Assessment of reading processes and reading products
- Assessment of reading skills and strategies with assessment of how students use what they understand from reading
- Assessment of cognitive and affective reading factors
- Formative reading assessment and 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 of expertise in reading assessment
Balancing Assessment of Reading Processes and Reading Products

All of our reading 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 in the midst of students’ learning. For example, as we observe a student applying phonics knowledge to sound out the \textit{ch} consonant blend, we are in the midst of the student’s use of decoding processes. When we observe a student rereading a sentence to clarify the meaning of the sentence, we are in the midst 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 assessment 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 are quizzes, tests, and questions related to students’ comprehension of text. When we examine test scores, we must make large, backward 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.

This is an important fact about product assessments: they are relatively limited in their ability to provide detail on what students can and can’t do as they read. The limitations stem from two distinct spaces: the space between the product of a reading assessment and the processes that created the product, and the space between when many product assessments are administered and when their results are available. An apt analogy might be one in which we try to determine \textit{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 and Strategies with Assessment of How Students Use What They Understand from Reading

Students must comprehend the texts they read. Students must also be able to \textit{use} the information they gain from reading in order to perform reading-related tasks. Current reading assessment focuses on skills and strategies: 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 read orally. We assess students’ abilities 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 the skills and strategies of reading.

In some reading assessment scenarios, students read to answer teacher questions or to do well on a quiz or test. Yet our reading should focus on reading to understand text and then using what we understand in reading-related tasks. When students read guidelines for conducting hands-on experiments prior to science inquiry, or when they read colonists’ diaries so that they can create a class dramatic presentation, their reading involves these two goals: to comprehend text and to use what is comprehended. Such reading is, of course, the norm outside of the classroom. So should it be in the classroom.

We need to remind ourselves that reading to answer comprehension questions occurs mostly in school settings and formal testing situations, not in the world outside. While comprehension questions can give us accurate ideas of students’ abilities to construct meaning, we must complement this type of assessment with information about how students use what is comprehended. Performance assessment, a form of authentic assessment, places students in reading and assessment situations that reflect the types of reading that we do and the manner in which we use that which we understand 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 strongly suggests that all that matters in reading assessment are the reading skills and strategies that make reading comprehension possible. There is, in these materials, an exclusive focus on the cognitive development of student readers. Yet experienced classroom teachers and parents know that possession of reading skills and strategies does not necessarily guarantee their students’ 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 reluctant readers to enthusiastic readers? of students who evolved from easily discouraged readers to readers whose motivation helped them persevere through difficult reading challenges? of students who once avoided reading at all costs but 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 student changes relating to motivation, perseverance, attributions made for reading success and failure, and identity as a reader. If we are serious about accountability, we need to have measures that demonstrate that professional teachers and superior reading programs change student readers’ lives. Such

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measures do exist; they include surveys and inventories of students’ reading motivation (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni, 1996), attitudes towards reading (McKenna and Kear, 1990), and reading self-concept (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 annual series of summative reading assessments. These assessments, commonly known as tests, report important summary information about students’ reading skills and strategies. They summarize reading achievement as a level, a raw score and a percentile, that ranks students against one another.

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

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

A hallmark of the successful reader is the ability to monitor his or her reading and conduct an ongoing assessment of reading progress (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995). However, many students move through school with reading assessment done to them, or for them. A result is that many students think of assessment as a “black box” (Black and William, 1998). Student work, such as a quiz, test, or written report, is handed in, evaluated and graded, and then returned to the student. The student earns a score but gains no understanding of how assessment works. A consequence of this approach to reading assessment is that students may learn little or nothing about doing reading assessment for themselves. Across school years there are countless lost opportunities for students to learn to conduct reading assessment on their own.

We must strive to provide opportunities in which students learn the value of self-assessment and the means to do accurate and useful assessment for themselves. This can be a long and challenging process. A good start is asking and modeling simple and straightforward assessment questions and helping students learn to ask them and answer them independently. For example, the habit of asking oneself...
“Does that make sense?” and “How do I know?” can help set young readers on a healthy path to self-assessment. We teachers do not give up our responsibility to conduct the array of valuable classroom-based reading assessments; rather, we look for opportunities when using these assessments to help students learn assessment themselves. If, in all our teaching related to reading, students do not begin to learn how to do self-assessment, then how will they ever become truly independent readers?

**Balancing Demands for Teacher and School Accountability with Opportunities for Professional Development of Expertise in Reading Assessment**

Accomplished teachers and effective schools take accountability to heart each and every day. This accountability is demonstrated through the care and professionalism with which teachers work with their students. In addition, teacher and school accountability are determined by the results of high-stakes testing. The costs involved in developing and buying, administering, and scoring these 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 actually help teachers become better at assessment and teaching. In fact, each of the necessary balances described in this monograph is dependent on teachers’ professional development in assessment.

Teachers become experts at 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 the daily successes of the classroom. Regular and detailed assessments provide information that helps teachers recognize and utilize the teachable moment. These daily successes together constitute the accomplished teaching and learning that is reflected in accountability tests. But accountability is not achieved through testing—it is achieved by the hard work and support that surrounds successful classroom assessment and instruction. Specifically, professional development can help teachers learn and use effective reading assessment materials and procedures that best influence the daily teaching and learning in the classroom. Thus, there needs to be a better balance between the call for teacher and school accountability and the means to help teachers and schools maintain their accountability.

**Summary**

Balance is necessary for effective reading assessment, and effective reading assessment is necessary for the success of a reading program. The current focus on high-stakes tests creates a series of imbalances that can have negative effects on our teaching and on our students’ learning. The balances in reading assessment described here help us meet the challenge of demonstrating adequate yearly progress with the promise of innovative and effective reading assessment in the classroom. 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.
REFERENCES


