

Effective Reading Assessment in First Grade

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Abstract:

Assessment impacts instruction in all areas of the classroom. In first grade, where reading is the single most important part of the curriculum, assessing literacy becomes critical. Reading assessment must achieve several goals, such as connecting to instruction, layering and follow literary standards. Reading assessment should not only reflect teaching and also further develop reading skills at this crucial stage. To create a solid evaluation plan for reading, teachers need to include a variety of acceptable assessment tools, including running records, Informal Reading Inventory, benchmarks and informal observation. By using a range of assessment forms, teachers will be able to effectively monitor reading for all students, regardless of learning style, strengths and weaknesses.

## Effective Reading Assessment in First Grade

When children start school and complete their first couple years, they learn something so important that they will use it every single day for the rest of their lives. Throughout life, we use reading so frequently that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in our society without it. First grade teachers have an incredible responsibility to nurture and further develop the literacy skills that their students acquired in kindergarten, and in order to do this, teachers need to use efficient reading assessment. “Assessment is one of the most important and pressing issues facing the literacy community” (Afflerbach 1994, p. 1). In first grade classrooms, it is critical to evaluate students reading progress using a variety of techniques, including running records and casual observation, to ensure that the assessment not only advances student reading skills, but also guides curriculum and literary instruction.

As a part of daily routine, teachers assess their students in all aspects of their learning. With reading, assessment is not as clear cut as a right or wrong answer, complicating the process. Reading assessment includes all, “activities that represent literacy behavior, and that reflect the actual learning and instructional activities of the classroom” (Afflerbach, 1994). Teachers must assess their students, and then use their results in a positive way to improve their instruction. According to Paramore (2007), “it’s not the assessments themselves- whether large-scale, high stakes or classroom based- that improve student achievement. It is how they are used to inform teaching and learning.” Clearly, assessment presents a very important challenge for teachers and becomes part of the reading curriculum, especially for young students learning to read.

In recent years, assessment’s role in the classroom has changed dramatically. This increase of focus on assessment does not surprise many education researchers. According to

author Susan Glazer, our society has become obsessed with assessment in all aspects. “Our nation is test crazy. We assess constantly and measure almost everything... Teachers are expected merely to get the students to perform well on tests,” (Paratore p. 8) she writes. In this modern results-based society, teachers often times get caught up in producing a letter grade, forgetting the main objectives of assessment and what is most important, student learning. Author Sheila Valencia states that assessment has a clear goal in what it is meant to accomplish. “The goal of classroom assessment is to promote student learning, not simply document it,” she writes (Paratore p. 228). This idea centers on the fact that assessment can be used for more than just the purpose of noting student progress, and that it should be used also to create curriculum and individualize instruction. Evaluation has become more of a top priority in classrooms, often overcoming significant topics, such as classroom management and curriculum planning.

Based on the goals of reading assessment, first grade teachers use many different types of reading assessment. Schools often require certain types, while teachers also often create their own assessment. Assessment comes in two forms: formal and informal. With reading, formal assessment would be nearly impossible, as learning to read is subjective and deciding what the student needs to improve on is most important. Informal assessment works best, as teachers are right there listening to the child, and can diagnose what the student is struggling with. Based on information from current first grade teachers, we will see that the many forms vary in utility and successfulness in the classroom. A few of the most frequent types will be discussed, beginning with external types, which are not currently used in first grade, and moving to internal types, which include the running record, informal reading inventory and benchmark assessment.

Internal assessment has a direct influence in first grade classrooms. However, external formal assessment has a direct influence on daily curriculum and instruction for all teachers at

grade three and above. This is the grade level when state-mandated standardized testing occurs, such as the ISTEP test in Indiana's school systems. This type of assessment does not directly affect a first grade reading education or the teachers delivering it. The instruction and assessment that occur in first grade are meant to prepare students for the standardized testing they will complete in grade three and after. So, internal assessments are used very frequently by first grade teachers. In these types, teachers are expected to create assessment specific to the learning and curriculum being used in her classroom. Internal assessment involves several aspects. First, it must include a tie to the curriculum. It must also be more specific than external testing, focusing on both process and product of reading. Finally, reading assessment must encourage teacher-student interaction and include direct feedback for instructors (Paratore 2007, p. 4).

Internal reading assessment occurs daily in first grade classrooms. The most commonly used form is the running record, which originated as an assessment tool in Reading Recovery programs (Fawson 2006). This is a standard teacher worksheet that can be used with any passage of reading and includes spaces to record the number of words, errors and self corrections, along with a comprehension summary. Teachers do these individually with each student, listening carefully to the child's reading, making checkmarks for each correct word to indicate that specific student's reading ability. This form of assessment is helpful because it takes into account not only errors that the student makes, but also the number of times the student self-corrects, which is a crucial step in reading development (Lapp 2005). The results are on a 100 point scale, which comes with a key to show the teacher what level that child is at with their reading ability, and whether or not that reading was instructionally appropriate for them.

Running records are used every day at Manchester Elementary, where first grade teacher

Patty Good utilizes a system in which she has divided her students into five reading groups. She has the help of trained teacher's aids that come in to her classroom at reading time. Mrs. Good is content with this set up, as she is able to teach and assess reading more individually. Each day that these groups meet, one child from each group reads and the teacher assesses them using the running record. No time is being wasted, however, as the other students are simultaneously reading quietly for more practice. Scores are recorded on a full class list which can be consulted at any time to compare progress or rearrange groups, which are made based on the child's reading level and development. Mrs. Good's use of running record makes sense, as according to Fawson (2006), the running record is the most widely used form of reading assessment. He notes that a study found that 62% of teachers belonging to the International Reading Association identified with using this form most often in their own classrooms (Fawson p. 113).

Marlo Quick, a veteran first grade teacher at Pleasant Center Elementary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, also uses running records most frequently in her first grade room. In an email interview on March 31, 2009, Mrs. Quick revealed her belief that the running record is invaluable to individualizing reading instruction. "Running records allow me to assess a student, discover what specific types of mistakes that student is making, teach mini lessons to help that student develop new strategies, allow guided practice and then reassess to see if the student is using the strategies to improve reading," she said. She is able to use the results from the running record in a positive way in her classroom. Based on the successful classrooms of Mrs. Good and Mrs. Quick, we can see that running records can have many beneficial effects on first grade students and flow of reading instruction into the curriculum.

Similar to the running record, the informal reading inventory is a second type of internal

assessment utilized in first grade. This tool consumes more time and goes further in depth than the running record. The informal reading inventory is “an individually administered instrument designed to sample a child’s reading on passages that are graduated in difficulty from easy to difficult” (Cooper 2001, p. 417). This form takes about 40 minutes per student, and addresses not only reading accuracy but also comprehension of the text. Comprehension questions are included, specific to that passage. The goal of the IRI is to determine a student’s reading level so that you can plan appropriate instruction (Lapp p. 113). With goals very comparable to the running record, the IRI achieves essentially the same result of determining the reading level, strengths and weaknesses of the student. Classroom time consumption represents the main downfall of the IRI.

There are a few types that are used less often in first grade, but still need to be addressed. The benchmark can be very helpful with assessing certain passages. A panel has reviewed preselected passages, and a sheet has been created to help with assessing the reading of the passage. The words of the book are typed out on the sheet, making assessment easier on the teacher, who needs to just place checkmarks and notes above the typed words. This strongly limits the teacher’s choice of material, as the panel has only reviewed certain stories. Patty Good also uses benchmark assessment with her students and believes that this type requires that the instructor pay close attention to all aspects of the student’s reading, including fluency rates, word recognition and motivation. One other type of more informal assessment involves simply observing students in a classroom setting. The main downfall is the lack of organization and the lack of a clean cut assessment score, as is often found with other types (Lapp p. 118).

As shown, several types of reading assessment are valuable in accurately evaluating first

graders. For example, running records successfully group students and allow the teacher to monitor their progress as the school year goes on. An additional form of assessment, however, can be helpful, such as informal observation. A benchmark assessment should also be used periodically as well when the story it accompanies applies to the unit the teacher is using. Teachers should look at assessment as a positive, and as a tool to guide instruction and enhance lesson planning, rather than as a negative hindrance. As stated in a study by Judy Fiene (2007), “Standardized tests do provide one indication of student’s comprehension developed while reading. However, we have shown that assessing students’ comprehension should consist of more than comp-check questions” (Fiene 406). This statement, though referring to standardized testing, still shows that simply focusing on one type of assessment can be harmful to accurately understanding a student’s reading progress.

After reviewing reading standards for first grade, it becomes clear that teachers may feel overwhelmed with the many aspects involved and all the techniques needed. However, another important piece still exists: reading comprehension. The significance of comprehension increases as the first grade school year goes on, as it will become necessary for students in the second and third grades when they will be reading independently and will have to understand the content. In fact, the majority of first grade reading assessment tools do not devote much attention to comprehension. Running records for first graders include a special section devoted to a quick evaluation of the student’s comprehension of the reading they are being tested on. However, this section is very small in comparison to the detailed assessment of reading the words, and contains only the student’s summary. Marlo Quick believes that it is important to note that all great readers may not comprehend effectively, just as students who understand the content may have difficulty decoding the passage. In other words, teachers need to make sure not to assume that a



good reader understands the passage, or that a student with great comprehension can decode the passage just as well.

While comprehension should not be the main focus of reading instruction, touching on summarizing a passage should be included. In first grade, learning to decode is the most important literary skill that the students need to learn and be assessed on. In David Wood's article on reading comprehension, he reviewed a study that determined reading fluency and comprehension can be connected. "The relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension is of considerable interest because it has significant implications for assessment and intervention" (Wood 2006, p. 85). In other words, teachers can achieve two goals by implementing some comprehension into reading instruction, as students can improve both their oral reading and their comprehension of what they are reading.

Reading assessment for first graders in reality has many benefits. First, reading assessment gives teachers a guide to show at which level each student in the classroom is. With specific tools such as running record, each student can be assigned a score. This score is carefully formulated to inform the teacher how well the student's reading level is progressing (Fawson 2006, p. 118). Reading assessment also enables teachers to follow standards, which are required by the state school system. Standards were created by professionals to raise student achievement, as noted by Paratore (2007). This can be true when teachers use what their literary assessment tells them to reach standards at certain points throughout the semester. Throughout reading instruction, teacher can also reach standards by implementing mini-lessons based on student weaknesses found. Since teachers know exactly what their students are expected to learn they can use their assessment to decide whether or not that is happening, promoting teacher

accountability.

In addition to the benefits of reading assessment, a few downsides effects classroom assessment. Patty Good, a 15 year teacher at Manchester Elementary School, has a full classroom with students that have varying levels of reading skills. While speaking with her, it becomes clear that assessment is a large part of teaching in general, but especially with literary skills. She works together with the other first grade teachers at the school. Together they formulate assessment strategies and use them in their own classrooms. Mrs. Good expressed the pros and cons of this approach, and that she regrets being held back from teaching her reading curriculum as she would like to. Time constraints cause her to have to work with one of her reading groups at unusual times of the day while her other students must work alone on unrelated assignments. Mrs. Good said that this causes her to involve extra planning to keep her classroom running smoothly. She expressed her frustration with the time crunch reading assessment causes.

According to Paratore (2007), there are three main ways that reading assessment can prove disadvantageous in early elementary classrooms. First, negative assessment can cause an unexpected change in the purpose of the instruction. Teachers once focused on teaching young children to read are now changing the purpose of the curriculum to reaching certain scores on assessments. It can also create an unfavorable influence on teaching and classroom flow, by causing it to center around assessment rather than instruction and learning, essentially turning into a product over process issue. Third, assessment can stifle teacher creativity and attitude towards teaching (Paratore p. 5). When these unconstructive consequences come together, teacher motivation and lesson planning can be effected, diminishing the role of standardized testing in assessing real learning. Of course, there are ways that teachers can avoid letting these

negative effects happen.

One way to avoid negative effects that assessment often brings, is to effectively connect the results of evaluation to actual instruction in the classroom. It is imperative for first grade teachers to provide their students with reading that is appropriate to their level of reading ability and moves them along to the next level. According to Afflerbach (1994), there are four important points to consider. To connect assessment and instruction, the evaluation must result in the best learning for all students. Also, it must “inform, support and justify teacher decision making” (Afflerbach p. 50). Third, assessment must reflect professional theory of language learning and literacy. As we know, teaching based on research is important to success. Finally, assessment results must be accurate, reliable and valid (Afflerbach p. 50). If these conditions are met, assessment will be correctly connected to the instruction of reading, avoiding the negative effects discussed previously.

Another way to teach with successful reading assessment is to make evaluation multilayered. According to Afflerbach (1994), a research study of an elementary school named St. Vital in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The analyzed school system in St. Vital believes that “assessment is most meaningful when it closely parallels instruction and the practice activities that precede it” (Afflerbach 167). The Multilayered Assessment Package, or MAP, that they use provides a variety of assessment techniques all in one packet. It includes 56 short stories that the students will read in that year. The study determined that the MAP was a very effective assessment technique that included many types in order to ‘layer’ evaluation. This is just one example of a way to make assessment multilayered, but the costs involved will likely stop a program like this from working in our public school systems.

Several well-known organizations have conducted studies to decide what assessment will be most effective. The International Reading Association, or IRA, and the National Council of Teachers of English came together to form a statement of the importance of reading and three points that should be addressed when choosing reading for young children (Cooper 2001, p. 415). They believe that it is crucial that teachers are able to choose material based on their knowledge of their students and their curriculum. Second, they believe it is important to observe the students using related material to form knowledge of how effective the new passage will be. Also, the statement says a checklist should be made that includes things that will effect success of a new reading, including student interests, texts, new concepts, length and more (Cooper 415).

Reading assessment can have both positive and negative effects directly on instructors. First grade teacher Marlo Quick has a positive outlook on the increase of need for literary assessment. She explained to me that reading assessment is the main driving force in helping her focus her instruction and individualize reading strategies for each of her students. “Giving assessments regularly and learning to understand what the assessment tells me about each child has helped me to become a much better and more focused teacher of reading,” she said. She is an advocate of running records, as she believes that being able to hear each child read has helped her to form instruction that applies to each student, even if that requires individual or small group attention. Teachers must keep the goals of assessment in mind as they are listening to their students read and remember to connect assessment to instruction in all areas of instruction.

After reading many research studies and books on reading assessment in early elementary, specifically first grade, it is most effective to provide a variety of assessment tools for students at this age level. It is dangerous to assume that one type of assessment is the best one

for every single student in your room. Students learn in all different ways and with many different learning styles. Some students may not read well in front of the teacher one-on-one, and then may excel when reading independently. A first grade teacher would be most successful by providing more than just one type of reading evaluation for students. Marlo Quick uses different reading assessments successfully in her classroom. “By using various assessment tools, I am able to find the strengths and weaknesses of each student and plan instruction that meets their needs,” she said. First grade teachers can create a successful reading curriculum by implementing varied assessment forms throughout the school year while including decoding, comprehension and fluency.