Early Reading Assessment: A Guiding Tool for Instruction

By: The Access Center

How do you choose the best method for measuring reading progress? This brief article describes which assessments to use for different reading skills so that you can make sure all students are making progress towards becoming readers!

Assessment is an essential element of education used to inform instruction (Wren, 2004). The first step in implementing good reading instruction is to determine student baseline performance. Students enter the classroom with diverse backgrounds and skills in literacy. Some students may enter the classroom with special needs that require review of basic skills in reading, while other students may have mastered the content a teacher intends to cover. Due to these various student levels, it is necessary to design literacy instruction to meet the individual needs of each student. Individual needs can be determined by initial and ongoing reading assessments. These assessments provide teachers with the information needed to develop appropriate lessons and improve instruction for all students, including students with disabilities (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). The information gained from appropriate assessment enables teachers to provide exceptional students with improved access to the general education curriculum. The following information is an overview of the purpose and benefits of early reading assessment, examples of data collection methods, and considerations for selecting a measure for students.

The purpose and benefits of assessment

Research provides evidence that specific early literacy concepts can predict young students' later reading achievement (DeBruinParecki, 2004). These reading concepts include letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. An effective reading program includes assessments of all of these concepts for several purposes.

One purpose is to identify skills that need review. Assessment provides teachers with information on what skills students have and have not mastered. It is needed to help teachers know the skill levels of their students, since students have varying experiences and knowledge.

A second purpose is to monitor student progress. A teacher can learn which students need review before covering additional content and which students are ready to move forward.

A third purpose is to guide teacher instruction. Through consistent assessment, a teacher can make informed decisions about what instruction is appropriate for each student.

A fourth purpose is to demonstrate the effectiveness of instruction. The information gained from assessment allows teachers to know if all students are mastering the content covered. It is important for teachers to use instructional time effectively, and this can be done when teachers are knowledgeable about what their students are ready to learn and what they already know. Therefore, the information gained from assessment allows a teacher to create appropriate instruction for their students.

Additionally, a fifth purpose of assessment is to provide teachers with information on how instruction can be improved.

Assessment examples for specific areas of reading

There are various ways to gather assessment data (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). Teachers can test students, analyze student work samples, observe students performing literacy tasks, or interview students on their reading skills. Teachers can gain the most information by administering all of these methods to collect data. The following information describes various types of assessments for different areas of early reading. Each assessment identified is described in the resources section of this brief.

Letter knowledge — The ability to associate sounds with letters

One example of an assessment for letter knowledge is to present a student with a list of letters and ask the student to name each letter. Another example is to have a student separate the letters from a pile of letters, numbers, and symbols. Students can also be asked to separate and categorize letters by uppercase and lowercase (Torgesen, 1998; Wren, 2004).

The following list is a sample of assessment measures to test letter knowledge skills:

1. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)
2. Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment (ERDA)
3. Phonemic awareness — The ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words

These assessments examine a student's knowledge of how sounds make words. A student can be asked to break spoken words into parts, or to blend spoken parts of a word into one word. Additionally, a student can count the number of phonemes in a word to demonstrate understanding, or a student can delete or add a phoneme to make a new word (Torgesen, 1998; Wren, 2004).

The following list is a sample of assessment measures to test phonemic awareness skills:

- Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP)
- DIBELS
- ERDA
- Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)
- Phonological Awareness Test (PAT)
- Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)

Emerging practice

The theory of multiple intelligences is one that many educators support and believe to be effective. Dr. Gardner developed this theory in 1983, and he suggests that eight different intelligences account for student potential (Armstrong, 1994; Gardner, 1983). They include:

1. linguistic intelligence
2. logical mathematical intelligence
3. visual spatial intelligence
4. bodily kinesthetic intelligence
5. musical intelligence
6. interpersonal intelligence
7. intrapersonal intelligence
8. naturalist intelligence

Dr. Gardner believes these intelligences should be used to assess students' strengths and weaknesses and teachers should develop assessments that allow students to demonstrate these intelligences. Although support can be found in some schools for this theory, it is not supported by rigorous research evidence at this time. Therefore, the Access Center considers the theory of multiple intelligences to be an emerging practice that requires further investigation.

Decoding — The process of using letter sound correspondences to recognize words

An assessment that examines a student's decoding skills looks at a child's reading accuracy. One example of this type of measure is to have a student read a passage of text as clearly and correctly as possible. The teacher records any mistakes that the student makes and analyzes them to determine what instruction is needed. Another example of an assessment

of decoding skills is to present a student with isolated words and ask them to read each word aloud (Wren, 2004).

The following list is a sample of assessment measures to test decoding skills:

- ITBS
- PAT
- TPRI
- Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE)
- Fluency — The automatic ability to read words in connected text

The most common example of an assessment for fluency is to ask a student to read a passage aloud for one minute. Words that are skipped or pronounced incorrectly are not counted. The number of correct words read is counted and this total equals a student's oral reading fluency rate.

The following list is a sample of assessment measures to test fluency skills:

- Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM)
- DIBELS
- Gray Oral Reading Test IV (GORT - 4)
- TOWRE
- TPRI
- Reading comprehension — The process of understanding the meaning of text

There are many types of reading comprehension assessments. One type involves a student reading a passage that is at an appropriate level for the student, and then having the student answer factual questions about the text. A second type involves a student answering inferential questions about implied information in the text. A third type involves a student filling in missing words from a passage. A fourth type is to have a student retell the story in their own words (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1992; Wren 2004).

The following list is a sample of assessment measures to test reading comprehension skills:

- Degrees of Reading Power (DRP)
- ERDA
- GORT4
- ITBS
- TPRI

Considerations when selecting an assessment

Due to the diversity among children, every assessment will not be appropriate for all students. Some measures for collecting data are more appropriate for a specific age level,

skill level, or culture, and teachers often find it beneficial to use multiple assessments when gathering information on student performance (Wren, 2004). It is important for teachers to have training in the strategies they use and feel comfortable with their implementation. Additionally, teachers should use strategies that are supported by research evidence and that will give them useful information about their students. A teacher can gain the most information from gathering information through both formaland informal assessments.

Different measures provide distinct information. Therefore, teachers need to implement assessments that will provide information about the skills their students have on the content and strategies they are teaching. Students with disabilities who are receiving special education services have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The IEP will contain documentation on measures that have been performed and the information they provided. Reviewing this information will help teachers determine what assessments are needed to supplement the measures that have been administered. Most important, assessment must be instructionally relevant and focused on essential skills. Therefore, assessments should always be culturally and linguistically appropriate (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, & Wu, 2003).

Summary

There are a variety of measures that can be used to gather data for each area of early reading. Assessment is a central element for any teacher and should be implemented regularly. Through its implementation, teachers will be able to help students access the skills and content they need from the general education curriculum. This will allow all students to achieve to their highest potential.

Note: It is important to follow all guidelines for implementing assessments. Some measures require specific training. Therefore, always read the instructions for each assessment carefully and follow all recommendations.