

Commentary on PROBLEMS COURT SESSION
Diagnosis of Reading Problems:
What Are the Issues?

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In describing the history of standardized testing, Resnick (1982) writes:

Educational testing initially served a gate-keeping function between school grades (a function to which it has recently returned.) Although it pointed to some difficulties with curriculum and instruction, the major function of educational testing did not turn out to be assisting teachers in their instructional planning. Indeed, there was considerable opposition from teachers to the testing. Support for comparative testing initially came from school administrators, who were particularly pleased about the accountability function of the tests.

The over emphasis on the "gatekeeping and accountability function of standardized reading tests" seems to be the focus of much of the criticism of testing discussed in this Problems Court Session, "Diagnosis of Reading Problems: What are the issues?" Otto feels that testing is counter productive when it does not help teachers make instructional decisions. Camperell feels that the use of standardized tests to group children for various placement aids administrators but harms children by labeling them. Hayes feels that assessments which fail to take into account the personal context of each child cannot adequately measure his/her progress.

The writers of the papers presented in this Problems Court all agree that the standardized tests currently in use have certain inherent weaknesses which limit their usefulness for instructional decision-making in the classroom. Johnston (1984) claims that the historical focus which stressed the testing of large groups for comparison and placement fostered the production of a certain type of test. Because of this historical focus, reading tests were developed which covered large amounts of curriculum content, which stressed silent rather than oral reading, which were product rather than process oriented, and which ignored the metacognitive components of reading. In most instances the validity of reading tests were determined from correlations with other reading tests; therefore, new tests differed little from those previously published.

The types of reading tests which have been published are of little value to teachers attempting to make diagnostic decisions in classroom settings. Yet, as Otto notes, teachers feel either resentful or guilty because they can find few uses for data from standardized reading tests. These feelings increase when test writers and evaluators such as Herman and Dorr-Bremme (1983), Ward (1978), and Yeh (1980) claim that teachers know too little

about standardized norm reference testing and therefore use these tests improperly in their classrooms. It is relatively easy for test developers to blame improper use of the tests rather than to determine if inherent weaknesses in the tests or in the assumptions guiding their development make them inadequate for classroom decision making.

Johnston (1984) comments on the need for change in reading assessment:

There is a great need for researchers to reflect upon and communicate the importance of their findings for assessment practice in applied settings. Research findings of late have tended to emphasize the importance of process over product, yet educators and researchers persist in depending on the more conveniently obtained product data. ...many researchers continue to ignore the metacognitive components of reading in their assessment and the importance of metacognitive aspects of assessment for instruction.... Instead of a concern over response outcomes, right or wrong, there needs to be greater concern over the reasons behind the responses. The bottom line is that we need to worry more about the assessment of process in the individual, and about the process of assessment in context.Failure to challenge the status quo may be the worst form of intellectual complacency.

The fact that some basic assumptions which have guided the development of standardized reading tests are faulty is an issue that needs to be addressed. Suggestions for reevaluating the development and use of standardized reading tests are slowly surfacing and need to be addressed.

A second issue raised in this Problems Court is that although continuous, informal testing is potentially productive, teachers actually do little of this type of assessment. Continuous, informal diagnosis is clearly dependent upon the observational skill of the teacher. If teachers are to become adept at using continuous, informal assessments, models for this type of assessment will need to be developed and taught. Teachers will need to become sensitive observers and recorders of students' reading behavior. The over-reliance on quantifiable test data has caused some teachers to distrust or at least give less credence to the validity of their observations of children in instructional settings. Helping teachers realize the value of careful observational data based in an instructional setting and completed over a length of time would likely increase the amount and quality of informal observations. An effective management system for recording daily or weekly observational data will also need to be developed if continuous assessment is to be done. Teachers will spend time doing activities which they feel most competent to perform. If they trust their ability to do informal, continuous assessment in reading, the amount of informal assessment in reading classrooms will increase.

Continuous, informal assessment by qualified teacher observers appears promising. Data gathered by qualified teachers in instructional settings should prove to be more useful in making instructional decisions than the data from product based standardized tests now being used. Carefully gathered anecdotal and observational data can shed much new light on the contexts in which children learn. However, this change to a one-to-one descriptive model of reading assessment places the responsibility for the quality of the assessment on the teachers rather than on the test instrument. Teacher training programs will need to teach methods for careful observation of student's reading behaviors in instructional settings. The validity of the assessment will depend, to a large degree, on the observational skills of the teacher-observer; therefore the careful training of classroom teachers will be essential.

The time is ripe for a careful evaluation of the issues of assessment and evaluation in reading. Movement from product to process oriented assessment and from formal to informal assessment can be seen. However, the impetus for improvement in reading assessment will probably not come from current test developers or from current administrators intent on gate keeping and accountability. Leadership in this area must come from reading researchers and educators who are familiar with the development of reading ability in a classroom setting. Discussing these issues in a Problems Court at a Reading Forum is a step in the right direction.

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