CHAPTER 2

Purposes of Reading Assessment

What Do Good Readers Do and How Can Teachers and Coaches Assess This?

CHAPTER TOPICS

Purposes of Reading Assessment

There are three basic purposes of reading assessment. First, a teacher or coach uses the assessment process to identify the good reader behaviors that a student displays and those that need instructional emphasis. Readers are not passive. They engage in a variety of activities as they construct meaning. Teachers and coaches must understand these processes, so they are equipped to select valid evidence that documents good reading. A teacher or coach must identify areas of strength and weakness with regard to the reader behaviors in order to align instruction with student needs. If the teacher or coach recognizes which good reader behaviors are absent or weak, he or she can design and focus instruction to introduce or strengthen them. The reader behaviors that are described in this chapter are closely aligned with the CCSS.

Second, teachers and coaches need to know how to determine a student's *reading level*—that is, the grade level at which a student can read in an acceptable fashion. The Standards set forth the goal of all students reading at their chronological grade level by the end of a grade, that is, by the end of fifth grade, a fifth grader should read and comprehend "at the high end of the grades 4–5 text complexity band independently and proficiently" (CCSSI, 2010, p. 14). Comparing a student's reading level with his or her chronological grade level can suggest the existence of a reading problem and the need for intervention instruction.

Third, teachers and coaches must assess progress. This involves noting progress in developing specific good reader behaviors as well as progress in moving toward competency in reading text at a student's chronological grade level.

Identifying Good Reader Behaviors and Areas of Weakness

What is this process called *reading*? What are readers doing as they read, and what do they have to learn? As teachers and coaches, what should we look for as we assess the developing literacy of our students? We have all been successful readers for many years. As a result, we seldom think about the act of reading; in fact, we tend to take it for granted. Let's engage in a short exercise to help us realize what we do so effortlessly every day of our lives as we read newspapers, magazines, grocery lists, road signs, novels, memos from the principal, and notes from a parent, to name only a few things. I am going to ask you to read a short selection, sentence by sentence, and to examine what went on in your mind as you read. Ready?

The Tale of Taffy and Diane

What did you do as you read this? You recognized the individual words, and you assigned some form of meaning to each one. You did this accurately and very quickly. You also recognized that this was a title and, based on the word *Tale*, you anticipate reading a story of some kind.

Diane wondered if she should keep Taffy. After all there were some advantages to having her around.

Again you recognized and assigned meaning to the individual words. You also inferred the existence of a problem with regard to keeping Taffy and you no doubt have questions. What kind of a problem? What will happen next? Will

Diane decide to get rid of Taffy? How will she do this? What will happen to Taffy? These questions lead you to read on, hopefully to find answers.

Taffy was very loving and seemed genuinely glad to be with her. She wasn't a whole lot of trouble and the expense was negligible.

Good readers synthesize information as they read and you connected the information in this sentence to the preceding one. However, you still have questions. Why did Diane want to get rid of Taffy if Taffy was loving and relatively trouble-free? Perhaps the word *negligible* gave you pause. It is not a common word and you may have had to think about its meaning. If it was an unfamiliar word for you, as a good reader, you used context and assigned a possible meaning. Given that it followed "wasn't a whole lot of trouble," you probably inferred that it meant insignificant or small. Perhaps *trouble* and *expense* raised an additional question. Who or what is Taffy?

But here was Taffy, pushing that darn thing back and forth, back and forth. She did this almost every day and Diane just couldn't break her of the habit.

At this point you are no longer aware of identifying and assigning meaning to words. For you, that is an automatic and effortless process. Your attention is focused on Taffy and Diane. Perhaps you have inferred that Taffy is an animal of some kind because she seems to enjoy pushing something (a toy perhaps) back and forth. What kind of animal? Perhaps a cat or dog but certainly not a goldfish or turtle. You have more questions than you did before, such as why would a pet's preoccupation with a toy lead her owner to consider getting rid of her? What kind of person is Diane? Perhaps you are now viewing her less favorably than before when you empathized with her difficult decision. You are using your prior knowledge and the clues in the text to predict possible answers to your questions. You are monitoring your comprehension. You know what you are unsure of. You are probably considering several possible interpretations—and, I might add, enjoying the suspense. Why do we stay up way past bedtime reading a book? It is because we have many questions about what will happen, and we want to find the answers. Otherwise, we know that sleep will elude us!

Taffy was making too much noise. That and the rebarbative movement were giving Diane a monstrous headache.

Good readers are aware of "roadblocks" to comprehension and I suspect you have now met one, the word *rebarbative*. What does it mean? What did you do?

I doubt that you reached for a dictionary. Caught up with the story action, you probably used the context of the story to assign a temporary meaning, such as *annoying* or *bothersome*. You then read on, eager to find out what will happen next.

> **Maybe she should get rid of Taffy but who would take her? Who would want her? And Diane knew she would feel guilty about it for the rest of her life if something happened to her pet.**

So Taffy is a pet. But what kind? At this point emotion enters the picture. If you are a pet owner, you can empathize with Diane's plight. You are caught up with what is happening! You are very aware of what you understand and of the questions you have. You want answers! You are probably even impatient with my comments. So let's move on.

> **Diane carefully examined her nails and shifted her position on the sofa. Taffy had finally finished. Diane sighed. She knew Taffy would head for the sofa and expect Diane to move so she jumped off.**

What picture is in your mind? Good readers engage in visual imagery as they read. You probably noted a contradiction. The picture of Diane examining her nails is meaningful, but the notion of a person jumping off a sofa introduces a somewhat discordant note.

> **Taffy watched her head for another chair. "Good kitty," she murmured and reached out to pet Diane.**

Were you surprised? And if you were, wasn't it fun? Had you considered the possibility that Diane was the pet, not Taffy? How did the names of Taffy and Diane lead you astray? And now you can probably say what Taffy was pushing back and forth: the vacuum cleaner. And you can go back and verify or change the meaning you assigned to *rebarbative* which means unpleasant, annoying, and/or irritating.

Let's summarize. What did you do as you read these few short sentences? First, you identified individual words. Most (if not all) were familiar to you, and you did not need to match letters and sounds. These words were what we call *sight words* —words that are recognized immediately without analysis. *Rebarbative* may have been unfamiliar, but as a good reader you were able to sound it out and pronounce it even though you had never seen it in print before. You assigned appropriate meanings to the words you identified. You connected the things you

knew about pets with the information in the text. You made inferences based on your knowledge and the clues in the text. You asked questions and located their answers. You monitored your own comprehension or lack of it. In short, you were extremely active, and your sole focus was upon constructing meaning and finding out what was going on.

These key reading behaviors are the basis for reading assessment. We need to find out whether readers are able to do what you did so effortlessly. If they cannot, we need to teach them strategies for doing so. And it is not enough to identify which good reader behaviors to assess after reading a story. We need to assess these in different forms of text. You were extremely successful with the Taffy and Diane scenario, but would you have been as capable if you were reading an insurance form, a mortgage agreement, or a statistics textbook? Students who employ good reader behaviors when reading stories may become hopelessly confused in a social studies or science textbook. Let's see how reading a science text is somewhat different from reading a story.

Proving the Continental Drift Theory

Right away, you are aware that the following selection will not be a story. Even if you have no idea what the "continental drift" is, you know you are reading a science text probably because of the word *theory*. You realize that it will be very factual, that you will be expected to learn something, and that it probably will not contain "fun" surprises such as finding out that Diane was a cat. You may wonder what is meant by *drift*. Does it carry the same meaning as a snow drift, an aimless movement, or a thread of conversation? Much reading of informational text involves asking questions and reading to find an answer in subsequent text.

If you look at a map of the world, you may notice a strange phenomenon. The outlines of some continents seem as if they could fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

As with the account of Taffy and Diane, you recognize and assign meanings to individual words. *Phenomenon* may be a new word but you can determine meaning from the context of the passage. Because it is preceded by *strange*, you probably assign a meaning of something that does not often occur. You are also aware that *outlines* do not refer to note-taking strategies involving Roman numerals and *jigsaw* does not refer to a tool of some sort. As a good reader, you understand that the common meaning of many words often change in science, social studies, and math texts.

In 1912 Alfred Wegener proposed the theory of the continental drift. He believed that the continents were once a single continent that broke and drifted apart to form today's continents.

Comprehending this passage is different from the passage concerning Taffy and Diane. You know that you are reading factual material that carries specific meaning. You also know that understanding each sentence is critical to understanding the whole. Have you ever deliberately skipped description in a story to focus on the characters' actions? Unlike a story where one can often skim over certain parts and still retain comprehension of the whole, you are aware that each sentence carries specific meaning that is critical to understanding of the passage.

What evidence was there for his theory? Identical plant fossils were found in all continents. The same reptile fossil was found in both South America and Africa. Rocks in the west of Africa matched those on the east coast of South America. Most scientists did not believe Wegener's theory. What force could be strong enough to move continents?

Can you begin to understand the complexity of expository text? The author lists evidence for Wegener's theory but does not explain why it is evidence. It is up to the reader to analyze why identical fossils and rocks suggest the existence of a single land form and why rocks found on the west coast of Africa and the east coast of South American are particularly telling. At this point, you are probably doing some careful rereading, what the Standards refer to as "close reading" (Coleman & Pimental, 2011).

When scientists were able to map the ocean floor, they discovered huge trenches and mountains. In 1960 Henry Hess suggested that they formed where magma pushed up through the ocean floor. This occurred when earth's plates moved apart.

New words continue to appear and more questions arise. Perhaps you know what *magma* means and perhaps you don't. Perhaps your concept of magma is fiery liquid flowing down the sides of a volcano, not up from the floor of the ocean. And while you are very much aware that earth's plates are not what you will use when eating dinner, you may not understand their specific meaning in reference to the ocean floor. You also have to identify what *this* in the last sentence refers to in order to make sense of the whole passage. You may be in the uncomfortable position of having to read on without clearly understanding the preceding text. This also may force you to reread. Expository text is seldom read in a continuous fashion. It generally takes the form of read, reread, read on, read back, read on, reread, and so on.

But what caused the plates to move apart? Hot currents in the mantle constantly rise, circle around, and fall in a process called convection. When the mantle moves, the plates floating on it also move.

Can you believe that you have only read a very small segment of science text? Consider all the unfamiliar concepts that you have encountered. Old vocabulary continues to appear in a new guise. *Mantle* is certainly not the ledge above a fireplace nor is it a cloak. What is *convection*? Can you begin to understand what students encounter and how even a good reader like you may feel overwhelmed?

Additional proof of the continental drift occurred when scientists studied the magnetism of rocks in the ocean that were formed from cooled lava of undersea volcanoes. Magnetic patterns indicated that the rocks formed at different times. This proved that the continental drift has occurred throughout Earth's history and is still occurring today.

More questions arise. Why are rocks in the ocean magnetic? How can magnetism tell their age? How is magnetism connected to currents in the mantle and the movement of continents? You are aware that you have to pull all this together, but you are also aware that you may need help to do so. As a good reader, you know when you comprehend and when you don't. As a good reader, you know exactly what you do not understand. If this text was assigned for a class, you would probably underline or highlight problematic parts to share with your teacher or classmates.

Consider some of the obvious differences between the account of Taffy and Diane and how Albert Wegnener's theory was proven. We can empathize with Taffy and Diane, at least those of us who are pet owners can. We can laugh at being fooled by the surprise ending. We really did not learn anything, except that names can be a powerful influence in our interpretation of text. Reading the passage was relatively easy; it demanded little effort on our part. We were not expected to learn but to enjoy.

The account of the continental drift theory was totally different. It was packed with unfamiliar concepts. The author assumed that the reader could draw inferences about why fossils in different places provided some evidence for the theory. The author also assumed that you could arrive at a definition of *convection*. There were more unfamiliar words than in the Taffy passage and they carried very specific meanings. What may be the primary issue is the difficulty and unfamiliarity of the concepts in the science passage versus those in the account of the unhappy Diane.

If you were successful in comprehending either or both of the two passages, you did so by engaging in good reader behaviors. Consider the list on page 22.

GOOD READER BEHAVIORS

Use letter and sound patterns to pronounce words accurately and fluently.

Learn new words and extend the meanings of known words.

Determine what is important in the text.

Ask questions and read to find answers.

Draw inferences.

Recognize text structure.

Summarize, synthesize, reorganize, and evaluate ideas.

Form and support opinions.

Recognize the author's purpose/point of view/style.

Monitor comprehension and repair comprehension breakdowns.

Can you recognize when you engaged in these behaviors during your reading of the two passages?

The good reader behaviors are the basis of reading assessment. They are not something different from the CCSS. They just say the same things in different words and perhaps in a more user-friendly fashion. The following chart demonstrates how these good reader behaviors and the CCSS are related.

MATCH OF GOOD READER BEHAVIORS TO THE CCSS

Use letter and sound patterns to pronounce words accurately and fluently.

Reading Standards: Foundational Skills K–5 (CCSSI, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Learn new words and extend the meanings of known words.

Standard 4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone (CCSSI, 2010, p. 10).

Determine what is important in the text.
Ask questions and read to find answers.
Draw inferences.
Summarize, synthesize, reorganize, and evaluate ideas.

Standard 1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

And

Standard 2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas (CCSSI, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Recognize text structure.

Standard 2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas (CCSSI, 2010, pp. 15–17).

And

Standard 5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relates to each other and the whole (CCSSI, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Form and support opinions.

Standard 8. Delineate and evaluate the arguments and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence (CCSSI, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Recognize the author's purpose/point of view/style.

Standard 6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

And

Standard 9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take (CCSSI, 2010, pp. 15–17).

Monitor comprehension and repair comprehension breakdowns.

Required for meeting all of the Standards.

Determining Reading Level

The second purpose of reading assessment is to determine a student's reading level. This task involves estimating a student's ability to read and comprehend text at different grade levels. The basic question is: Can the student handle most of the selections that are used at his or her chronological grade level? The first indication of a reading problem is generally that a student cannot read as well as his or her classmates. If a third grader can read and comprehend selections that

are appropriate for third grade, we say that this student is reading *at grade level*. A third grader who can read and comprehend selections appropriate for fifth grade is reading *above grade level*. One who is only comfortable with a first-grade selection is reading *below grade level*. An important category of reading assessment is determining what general level of text the student can read successfully.

Reading assessment often involves determining a student's instructional, independent, and frustration reading levels. The *instructional level* is the level of text that the student can read and comprehend with some assistance. *Independent-level* text is text that the student can read and comprehend without assistance. *Frustration-level* text is text that the student is not able to read with adequate word identification accuracy or comprehension. Unfortunately, for many students, their classroom text represents a frustration level.

However, nothing is ever as easy and straightforward as it may appear. Readers do not have a single instructional reading level. They may have a higher level when reading narrative text than when reading social studies or science text. Their instructional level for social studies text may be higher than for science text. What this means is that ideal assessment should pay attention to the different disciplines and realize that a competent reader of narrative fiction may experience difficulty reading social studies and science text at that level.

Determination of reading level is especially important given Standard 10 of the CCSS. Students are expected to read grade-level text, that is, text at their chronological grade level. To put it another way, according to the Standards, a student's instructional level should be the same as his or her chronological grade level. If it is not, the student should receive instruction for the specific purpose of raising the student's present level to his or her chronological grade level.

Unfortunately, the focus of intervention instruction has been to concentrate on instructional-level text with success measured as progress to the next level. It has not focused on helping a student attain a reading level that is appropriate for his or her own chronological grade level (Klenk & Kibby, 2000). The focus on instructional-level text in intervention settings is well-intentioned. Students are asked to read what they can handle with some support and, as a result, they are not placed in an uncomfortable situation. The avoidance of frustration-level text has been based on the premise that it leads to a negative emotional response in the reader. Frustration-level text is presumed to cause stress, decrease motivation, and reinforce bad habits such as lack of fluency. But, little research supports such assumptions. "Certainly students can be emotionally frustrated by difficult texts. However, they can also be highly motivated by these texts, depending on factors such as interest, prior knowledge and social considerations (Halladay, 2012, p. 60).

A focus on instructional-level text that is below a student's chronological grade level will not necessarily help the student to function in his or her

classroom. It "may bar access to concepts and ideas otherwise acquired by reading grade level text. . . . Lack of exposure to grade level concepts, vocabulary and syntax may prevent children from acquiring information that contributes to their development of language, comprehension and writing" (McCormack, Paratore, & Dahlene, 2003, p. 119). However, it is still important to know a student's instructional level because it indicates the seriousness of a student's reading problem and the amount and intensity of the intervention instruction he or she should receive.

Determining Text Level

What makes a selection appropriate for one grade and not for another? In other words, how do we decide that a selection is at a specific grade level? In most cases teachers are given a textbook selected by the district and represented by the publisher to be at an appropriate grade level. Many classroom libraries are grouped according to the levels printed on the back of the book. Where do these levels come from, that is, how do publishers differentiate between a fourth-grade text and a fifth-grade one? Publishers use "readability formulas" to determine difficulty level. Readability formulas are based on the premise that longer sentences and longer words make text more difficult. These formulas count such things as the number of words in a sentence, the number of syllables in the words, and the number of words that are not considered common or frequent.

Readability formulas have serious limitations (Fisher et al., 2012). Various factors beyond sentence and word length interact to make a selection easy or difficult or appropriate for one grade level and not for another. Readability formulas do not take account of these factors. The presence or absence of pictures can make a text more easy or more difficult. Predictable text with often-repeated refrains or rhyme is generally easier and more appropriate for the lower grades. Text structure is another factor. Narratives are easier to understand than expository text. Page layout and the presence or absence of headings and other graphic aids are other considerations. Text coherence also influences difficulty level. Coherent texts are well organized, and authors clarify how each new piece of information is related to what they have already presented. They signal the introduction of new topics and organize ideas according to importance. Concepts represent different levels of difficulty. Reading about immigrants and the rise of the unions in late 19th-century America may be less difficult than reading about the structure of cells and organs. In addition, a reader's prior knowledge is a powerful determinant of text difficulty. A student who knows quite a bit about the topic of the text will find it easier to read and understand than an unfamiliar text at the same readability level.

Given all of these determinants of text difficulty, how do teachers or coaches choose appropriate texts for instruction? As mentioned previously, the recommendation was to provide students with text at their instructional reading levels, which was not easy to do. First, it presumed that the classroom teacher or coach knew each student's instructional level, which may or may not have been the case. Second, it presumed that texts at multiple levels would be available. While this was generally true for recreational reading, finding a variety of text at different levels on the same social studies and/or science topic was seldom possible. However, primarily in response to the Standards, we now realize that grade-level text can be appropriate for instruction of below-level readers if handled skillfully and sensitively. The focus of the CCSS on grade-level competence supports the use of grade-level text for all readers, and coordinating intervention instruction with classroom instruction represents a viable direction (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013).

Noting Student Progress

The overall purpose of instruction is to raise a student's instructional reading level. If the student's instructional level represents a match with his or her chronological grade level, we must guide the student to the next highest level. That is, if a fifth grader is reading at a fifth-grade level, we want that student to progress to the next level. If a student's instructional reading level is well below his or her chronological grade level, we must still focus on moving him or her to the chronological grade level although we know this may well represent a much harder task. The assessment process is thus centered on the determination of student progress. This is a critical component of response to intervention; the presence or absence of progress drives a student's movement through the tiers and possible assessment for a specific learning disability.

First, we assess what a student does well and what a student finds difficult, that is, we assess a student's proficiency with regard to specific good reader behaviors and/or Common Core standards. We do this for the specific purpose of designing instruction that matches the student's needs. As an integral part of instruction, we assess to note progress in one or more good reader behaviors and/or Standards.

Second, we assess a student's reading level with regard to level of text and type of text and ask the following questions. What level represents the student's highest instructional level? Does this level cross literature, social studies, and science or does the student exhibit different levels for different disciplines? What is the size of the gap between a student's instructional level and his or her chronological grade level? Again, once we have determined a student's reading level, we assess to note progress toward a higher level.

Throughout this book, we will be examining various forms of assessment that focus on the good reader behaviors and on student reading level.

Summary

- There are three main purposes of reading assessment: identification of the good reader behaviors, determination of a student's reading level, and assessment of progress in moving toward competency in reading text at a student's chronological grade level.
- Readers engage in a variety of good reader behaviors when they read. They use letter and sound patterns to fluently pronounce words. They attach meaning to words through context. They determine what is important in the text. They ask questions, find answers, and draw inferences. They recognize text structure and summarize text content. They form and support opinions and recognize an author's purpose. They monitor their comprehension and repair comprehension breakdowns.
- The good reader behaviors are the basis of reading assessment and they are closely related to the CCSS.
- Determination of reading level involves identifying a student's instructional reading level, that is, the level at which the student can read with some assistance. Determination of the instructional reading level is important given Standard 10, which states that students should be able to read text at their chronological grade levels. If the instructional level is below the chronological grade level, the student should receive instruction for the purpose of raising the present grade level to an appropriate level.
- An instructional focus on instructional level text may deny the student access to grade-level concepts, vocabulary, and syntax.
- Text leveling is based on readability formulas that are limited. They do not take account of text factors such as pictures, text structure, and page layout. They do not take account of text coherence and the difficulty level of the concepts.
- Assessment of progress involves a focus on the good reader's behaviors and the student's reading level.

Activities for Developing Understanding

- Select a short piece of text. Read it sentence by sentence. Stop after each sentence. What were you thinking of as you read each sentence? Use the list and

chart in this chapter to identify your comprehension activities. Which good reader behaviors did you employ? Which Common Core standard did you meet? Share this exercise with a friend. Compare your thoughts, your good reader behaviors, and the Standards you met.

- Examine your own reading proficiency. What type of text probably represents your frustration level, your independent level, and your instructional level?
- Describe a time when you were required to read frustration-level text. How did you feel? What strategies did you engage in to make sense of the text?
- Compare three selections at the same grade level: a story, a selection for a social studies text, and a section from a science text. How are they alike? How are they different? Which one seems easier and why?

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