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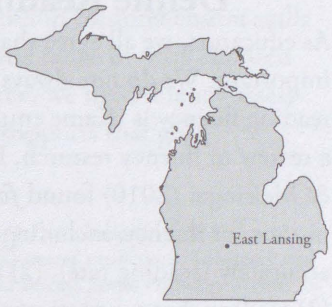
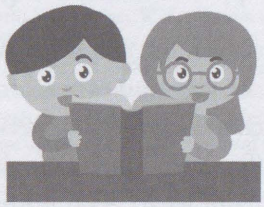


Laura Tortorelli

When young children enter school, one of our primary goals is developing their reading fluency. Fluency is a key milestone in a child's reading development when decoding and comprehension begin to happen simultaneously (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). When children can devote their attention to meaning, rather than to deciphering the words on the page, they can read independently and enjoy longer books with engaging plots and characters. Reading fluency opens up a new world for young children, giving them access to reading like adults—on their own, for pleasure and learning. As soon as children enter this world, however, we teach them to read another way: fast. In this article, I question this decision and discuss theory and research on reading fluency to argue for more comprehensive fluency assessment and instruction.

Fast Fluency: The Role of Reading Rate

Over the past fifteen years, reading rate has become the central focus of fluency assessment and instruction in classrooms across the country (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006; Samuels, 2007; Valencia et al., 2010). *Reading rate* is a measure of how fast children read text. Reading rate measures the number of words a child can accurately identify in one minute, known as Words Correct per Minute (WCPM). Reading rate is a common feature of both standardized reading assessments like the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS), as well as of AIMSweb and informal assessments like running records and informal reading inventories (Hasbrouck and Tindal, 2006; Morris et al., 2013; Valencia et al., 2010). Fluency interventions often focus on increasing reading rate (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; NICHD, 2000; Therrien, 2004). A child working on developing fluency may complete a timed



running record every reading session, chart his or her reading rate once a week, or read the same passage multiple times until he or she achieves a specified reading rate goal.

As a result, children's reading rates play a large role in determining how "successful" we consider them to be as readers, the books we offer them to read, and the daily reading experiences they have in school (Good, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2001; Samuels, 2007; Valencia et al., 2010). A recent study even indicated that reading rate now predicts reading self-efficacy; children may believe that in order to be "good" readers, they have to read fast (Kasperski, Shany, & Katzir, 2016).

There are good reasons that reading rate has become popular in classrooms. Reading too slowly can be a sign of reading difficulties and can interfere with reading comprehension. Reading rate is quick and easy to measure, whereas comprehension is hard to assess, especially for young children. Finally, reading rate is useful for progress-monitoring, offering teachers a welcome way to show kids their reading is improving from week to week. At the same time, however, research raises three questions about whether reading rate is the best way to measure reading fluency.

Question 1: How Do We Define Reading Fluency?

As educators, we all agree that reading fluency is important. We do not always agree, however, on what reading fluency is (Kame'enui & Simmons, 2001). In a review of fluency research, Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger (2010) found ***four*** regularly-used definitions for fluency, including (1) reading quickly and accurately (reading rate), (2) reading with expression, (3) reading that supports good comprehension, and (4) overall skilled reading. Kuhn et al. (2010) argue that a comprehensive definition of reading fluency includes all these aspects; fluent reading is quick, accurate, and expressive, and supports understanding of the text.

When we focus on reading rate in fluency assessment and instruction, we leave out expression and comprehension, which are the meaning-related aspects of reading fluency (Samuels, 2007). We also send messages to our students about what "good reading" is–fast–that leave out the ultimate purpose of reading–to understand.

Question 2: What Does Reading Rate Measure?

One reason reading rate is commonly used to assess reading proficiency is that research indicates that reading rate is highly correlated with reading comprehension and standardized test scores (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Williams et al., 2011). As a result, teachers often believe that by assessing reading rate, they are also gaining insight into their students' comprehension and overall reading proficiency. Valencia et al. (2010) raised questions about this simple equation, however, by studying the reading fluency of 93 students in second grade, 91 students in fourth grade, and 95 students in sixth grade. They found that separate measures of reading accuracy, speed, and expression actually predict comprehension better than reading rate and explain more of the variation we see among children. They concluded that a child's WCPM score does not necessarily provide a full picture of other aspects of proficient reading, like accuracy and comprehension. In my own research, I have found that children with slow reading rates can differ significantly from one another in their reading accuracy, expression, comprehension, and standardized reading test scores (Tortorelli, 2016).

While reading rate does provide a quick "thermometer measure" of children's reading (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006, p. 640), we need to look deeper if we want to understand their overall reading health. Assessing a broader range of fluency skills, including accuracy, expression, and comprehension, can tell us more about a child's strengths and needs as a reader than relying on a single number.

Question 3: What Are Students Reading?

Reading rate norms can tell us *how fast* children should be reading, but not *what* they should be reading. Researchers agree that "text impacts fluency development" (Samuels, Ediger, & Fautsch-Patridge, 2005, p. 4). Few studies, however, have examined the relationships between texts and reading fluency (Hiebert & Fisher, 2005). As a result, our fluency practices lag behind our understanding of reading as a dynamic, interactive process, influenced by readers, texts, activities and social contexts (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

The studies that have examined the influence of texts on reading rate have found that reading rates do vary among texts, making it hard to determine if a child is really a "fast" or "slow" reader compared to reading rate benchmarks. Reading rates change from text to text even at the same grade level (Ardoin, Williams, Christ, Klubnik, & Wellborn, 2010; Begeny & Greene, 2014). Narrative texts are generally faster reads than informational texts (Graesser, Hauft-Smith, Cohen, & Pyles, 1989; Haberlandt & Graesser, 1985).

In addition, more cohesive texts can support children's fluency and affect reading rates. *Cohesive* texts have many connections among the words and sentences that comprise them, including repeated words and ideas and connective words and phrases like *because* and *as a result* (Mesmer et al., 2012). Rashotte and Torgesen (1985) and Faulkner and Levy (1994) found that

fluency interventions that use cohesive texts resulted in greater increases in reading rate over time, particularly for struggling readers. Cain and Nash (2011) found that children read cohesive sentences more quickly than less cohesive sentences. Building on this previous work, my research with children in second grade found that children read cohesive informational passages more quickly than less cohesive passages, after controlling for text grade level (Tortorelli, 2015).

As teachers, we want children to read and experience with a wide variety of texts, including narrative and informational texts, and texts at different levels of challenge and difficulty. The Common Core State Standards and the Michigan State Standards require the use of texts in multiple genres, formats, and levels of complexity in the elementary grades. It is important to remember, however, that when we vary the texts that children read, we can expect reading rates to vary also.

Building Full, Multi-faceted, Flexible Fluency

Every day in classrooms across the country, young children are being timed as they read. These reading rate assessments and interventions, however, do not necessarily reflect all the important aspects of fluency or the fact that children's reading experiences may vary from text to text.

Reading fluency is important, but we can expand how we define, measure, and encourage fluency development in our classrooms to encompass the full definition of fluency, which includes a close look at children's reading accuracy, expression, and comprehension. Marcell (2011), Johns (2007), and Rasinski (2012) have all argued for more robust fluency instruction which emphasizes the multi-faceted nature of fluency and its role in meaning-making. We can also be more flexible about how fluency develops. Instead of expecting reading rate to increase every week, we can acknowledge that it may change from week to week depending on what our students are reading.

As educators, we have to ask ourselves what kind of readers we want our students to become. Do we want readers who read fast or who read well, with deep comprehension? Do we want readers who can read and understand complex, informational texts? If the goal of reading instruction is to develop comprehension skills that can be applied across the range of texts children will encounter over a lifetime, we need fluency assessment and instruction that supports that goal.

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