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Informal Techniques Aiding Diagnosis in Reading

by Jerry L. Johns

During the past twenty years, people have become increasingly aware of the fact that a great number of girls and boys do not read as well as they should. Surveys of reading achievement and numerous research reports generally indicate that from ten to thirty per cent of all the students in school are having difficulty in reading for a variety of reasons. In order that these students may receive the help they require, it is necessary that teachers: 1) identify students with difficulties in reading; and 2) uncover and study their specific types of needs so that instruction can be effective. It has been said that the classroom teacher is in the best position to determine whether or not a student is having difficulty in reading. This statement probably rests on the fact that the teacher can observe the child daily in a variety of situations. The teacher can see how the child functions normally, discover the kinds of errors that he makes, and what he can do easily as well as things that cause him difficulty. The teacher also has the opportunity to compare his performance in reading with his ability in social studies, science, and mathematics.

Cumulative Folders

In an attempt to know each pupil better, the teacher should supplement his observations by the use of a number of sources of information. Children's cumulative folders are a helpful beginning point. These folders contain records which previous teachers have made on each student. From these records the teacher may learn of each student's scores on readiness tests, intelligence tests, and standardized achievement tests. The achievement test battery probably includes tests on reading comprehension and vocabulary. Since many basal reader programs now have tests which accompany the student's readers, the teacher will want to peruse the results even more carefully.

In addition to test results, each folder is likely to contain a record of the student's school attendance, the marks he has earned in various subjects for the previous years of school, personal and family information, miscellaneous samples of the student's work to date in various school subjects, and anecdotal records written by teachers on pertinent occasions. It should be realized that cumulative records, like weather reports, have to be viewed with some reser-

vation and used with certain precaution because they are far from infallible. The limitations that often accompany cumulative records are errors in both reporting and interpretation of data. Even if all the information in the cumulative records were accurate, it is important to realize that information in and of itself has never particularly helped a pupil; it is the adjustment of instruction in light of the information that makes the difference. Diagnosis implies assessment to be used in correcting weaknesses.

Need for Informal Testing

One of the most widely used methods of diagnosing students with reading difficulties is with various tests. Leading authorities suggest that whenever, possible, standardized test procedures should be used since they allow the diagnostician to compare the disabled reader with his more fortunate typical counterpart, thereby locating his strengths and weaknesses with a minimum of clinical bias. Even though the diagnosis is based on standardized tests, it is often necessary to expand the diagnosis with informal procedures because not all reading skills are measured by standardized tests. At times, therefore, informal tests are the only or most appropriate methods of gaining information. Informal tests are also valuable to use at more frequent intervals than standardized tests and, if properly made, are often valid and reliable. Informal tests, based

upon the reading materials used in the classroom and charts of faulty habits and difficulties observed when the child is reading, can provide the best basis for planning effective instruction. In order to plan for effective instruction, it is first necessary to determine the student's instructional level.

Informal Reading Inventory

The informal reading inventory is a valuable tool for estimating the levels of reading among students. Although there are numerous sources explaining informal reading inventories, Betts¹ has provided detailed instructions for constructing and administering individual and group reading inventories. The procedure involves presenting a graded series of reading books or other materials to a student who is asked to read short passages from them at succeeding levels of difficulty until his comprehension is less than fifty per cent, or his word recognition errors total more than one out of every ten running words. Using the criteria suggested by Betts, teachers will be able to determine the independent, instructional, and frustration levels of their students. These levels are valuable for planning effective individual instruction.

Informal Word Recognition Test

Before giving the informal reading inventory, it is sometimes advantageous to give an informal word recognition test in order to estimate the

starting point for oral and silent reading in the reading inventory. It is a relatively simple matter for the teacher to check a student's ability to deal with words in basal reader or various supplementary books. One approach, suggested by Harris², uses a sample of the total vocabulary in a book. Samples can be obtained by selecting one word which occurs in a particular position on every seventh page. For example, the fourth word which appears in the sixth line could be selected. Following this basic plan, simple lists can be made for each book used in the class thereby resulting in a word recognition test. Another procedure simply involves taking a representative random sample from the cumulative list of words which appears at the end of most basal readers.

Check Lists

When using any informal techniques for diagnosing reading difficulties, it is important that the teacher have a check list so that information relating to various aspects of the student's reading can be jotted down. The teacher may want to record the student's ability to work with initial and final sounds of consonants, vowel sounds, initial and final blends, speech patterns, and so forth. It is important that check lists are used for such purposes as evaluating the oral reading of children, appraising their silent reading, and getting information about what they are reading

or have read and how they like it.

Using the Results

These and other informal tests can be very useful to the perceptive teacher. The teacher might check the scores obtained on standardized tests with the scores from the informal reading inventory or compare written observations with various diagnostic tests. In comparing tests, the teacher should remember that it is the function of tests to aid his judgment, not to replace it. It is when tests are used in this way that they are more likely to become blueprints for instruction.

Tests, both formal and informal, represent a substantial part in diagnosing reading difficulties, but unless they are used in conjunction with observation, oral evaluation, cumulative records, and other evaluative techniques, serious error may and probably will result. One should not underestimate the role of tests in diagnosis; however, test results should be used to **guide** our treatment of reading difficulties. They should not be used to dictate our actions, thereby dominating our professional knowledge and experience.

1. Betts, Emmett, Foundations of Reading Instruction. (New York: American Book Company, 1950).
2. Harris, Albert, How to Increase Reading Ability. (New York: Longmans, Green, 1961).

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