

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

Teaching Reading Assessment

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Independence in reading is the ultimate goal of reading instruction (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Children must be able to select, comprehend, and use a variety of texts both in and out of school. They must be able to read increasingly complex texts on their own. Thus, fostering independence in reading should be an instructional priority, and teaching reading self-assessment is central to accomplishing this (Afflerbach, 1997).

There is substantial evidence for the need to teach reading assessment. The research on comprehension, metacognition, and comprehension monitoring describes good readers as those who are able to set goals for their reading and gauge progress towards these goals while reading. For example, a developing reader can assess if a word he or she has just decoded is familiar and if it makes sense in the sentence. More accomplished readers may monitor both comprehension and whether or not their understanding is sufficient enough to meet an assigned purpose for reading, for example, to write a persuasive essay, based on the reading.

Helping students develop independence and the ability to self-assess is also at the heart of the majority of standards for reading (National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association, 1996). Across states and school districts, reading is emphasized as a means to help students achieve life-long success. It is widely acknowledged that the ability to read contributes to personal and social development, and that successful reading helps students become contributing members of society. When we help a student develop phonemic



awareness, learn sound-symbol correspondences, and decode words, our ultimate goal is to have children do these critical tasks on their own. When we teach comprehension strategies so that students may, for example, predict the contents of a chapter or determine the main idea of a paragraph, our intention is that students soon will be able to use these strategies themselves. Attempts to help students meet rigorous reading standards must be accompanied by the teaching of reading assessment.

Using reading assessment to foster reading independence requires that we adopt a particular

perspective on assessment. In addition to the more prevalent use of assessment to measure and describe student growth and achievement, we must use it to help teach children how to self-assess. However, using reading assessment to teach independence in reading requires that we conceptualize reading assessment as a set of opportunities to model and teach. We must look for contexts in which we can familiarize students with assessment materials and procedures, help them develop self-assessment strategies, and help them become familiar with the culture of reading assessment. Too many students have reading assessment done to them, or for them. More reading assessment needs to be done with students and by students in order to foster true independence and success in reading (Leipzig and Afflerbach, 2000).

Finding time to teach reading assessment can be a challenge. With the typical emphasis on helping students prepare to take assessments and the teacher's role as administrator of assessments, there may be no time to actually teach in relation to the assessment. A common scenario is one in which a teacher has to work with a mix of statewide assessments, district assessments, and the daily assessment routines that are the hallmark of a successful reading program. With these various demands it may be that we do reading assessment rather than teach reading assessment. We must help students become familiar with the ways and means of reading assessment so that they can eventually evaluate their own progress and learning. Without this experience, all the good teaching that is done related to phonemic awareness and phonics, decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies will have less of a positive impact.

Given the importance of self-assessment in reading, we have several tasks. First, we need to develop the expertise to teach reading assessment effectively. Second, we need to identify the reading-assessment strategies and routines that are helpful to students moving toward independence in reading. Third, we need to identify the contexts and situations in which reading assessment can be taught and learned. How can our expert teaching help foster the ability of students to

assess their own reading? There is compelling evidence for the effectiveness of teaching reading strategies, including predicting, summarizing, and questioning the author. Learning these strategies has a positive effect on reading performance.

Comprehension-strategy research demonstrates that students become strategic when instruction is careful to include an explanation of the importance of the strategy and how to use it, modeling the strategy as it is used in reading (Paris, Wasik, and Turner, 1991). Just as we model, explain, and encourage students to use comprehension strategies as they read, we should model, explain, and encourage students to develop assessment strategies. Over time, if a teacher models assessing his or her own reading, this process can become internalized by students. Students may then begin to use self-assessment strategies independently. Identifying the needs of our students in relation to self-assessment is best accomplished through teacher observation of student reading. Is the student mindful and reflective while reading? Does the student demonstrate an ability to identify problems during reading, to focus on them, and to fix them? Does the student read and attend to the text at hand while keeping track of the purpose for reading? If so, the student is demonstrating good self-assessment strategies. In contrast, a student who does not realize that the reading process has gone astray, or who does not appear to know how to correct an apparent difficulty may need effective self-assessment instruction. Such students may benefit from explicit teaching of assessment strategies, for example, self-questioning. Readers can ask themselves, "Does that make sense?" and "How do I know?" These questions are strikingly simple and direct, and yet they represent the foundation on which all independent readers base their success. These basic questions contribute to a student's reflective mindset. Over time, students can learn additional comprehension monitoring strategies: apprehend difficulties, locate difficulties, and apply fix-up strategies. Students can check on the success of a strategy and get back on track with the larger reading task.

Developing our abilities to teach reading assessment and to understand what individual students need must be complemented by our ability to identify the classroom contexts in which we may most effectively teach reading assessment (Hoffman, Baumann, and Afflerbach, 2000). This is especially crucial given the amount of time we may be required to spend administering tests.

Teacher Feedback to Students During Oral Reading

Thoughtful teacher feedback during oral reading presents opportunities for students to learn reading-assessment techniques. The most prevalent form of classroom discourse is the IRE pattern, or Initiate, Respond, Evaluate. In this pattern, the teacher Initiates talk, often with a question. A student Responds to the question. The teacher then Evaluates the student's response. With this common pattern, there is the opportunity for teachers to "talk around" the IRE. That is, a teacher might think out loud about why he or she is asking a particular question and how he or she is understanding the response to the question. Another teacher might think out loud about how he or she is evaluating the quality of the student's response. Each of these examples provides students with an understanding of how assessment happens. Uncovering the assessment process makes it familiar to students and presents a model that will eventually be internalized by them. Follow-up questions for student readers are of critical importance. The seeds of successful student self-assessment are often planted by the thoughtful questions of teachers who ask "Does that make sense?" and "How do you know?" Such questions provide an opportunity for teachers to model question asking for students.

Portfolios

The portfolio is ideally suited for helping students develop independence in assessment. Because of the many uses that reading portfolios may have, it is important to dedicate a portion of the portfolio for students to reflect on their work. The reflection aspect of portfolios provides students with an ideal context in which to become more familiar with self-assessment. For example, the portfolio is a useful context in which students can learn to accurately

assess their progress toward long-term goals, such as the completion of a complex report based on the reading of several chapters or books. In addition to helping students work on their self-assessment strategies, such portfolio use can prove motivating as it demonstrates to students both their reading progress and their metacognitive control of the act of reading. A portfolio pocket dedicated to a young reader's developing sight word vocabulary can be used to help a student independently determine what words are "known," what words are "being learned," and what words are "unfamiliar." Repeated work with such materials can help students develop confidence in assessing their own knowledge and learning. Fostering student use of portfolios in this manner requires that teachers regularly model and explain the different ways in which portfolios facilitate self-assessment.

Performance Assessments

Performance assessments are increasingly popular. Their popularity is a reaction, in part, to the relatively limited ability of multiple-choice tests to describe a full range of student accomplishments related to reading. Performance assessments also hold great promise for teaching self-assessment. A key aspect of evaluating performance is the use of rubrics. Rubrics provide detailed information, in the form of scoring points and samples of performances, that can help in teaching assessment. Further, rubrics can provide a model and explanation to students of what must be done to earn a particular grade for a performance. Teachers may also display rubrics to teach and guide student self-assessment. Detailed rubrics provide the type of information that helps readers focus on different critical features of their reading performance. Well-constructed scoring rubrics may be seen as a guide to doing good work. Samples of student work discussed in relation to a scoring rubric may help students internalize a schema for increasingly complex self-assessment routines. Finding a place on the classroom wall for a public display of reading rubrics and regularly referring to the rubric in classroom discussions will provide students with a consistent model of how assessment works and how their work will be evaluated.

Checklists and Observation Forms

Checklists help us take note of a broad range of student reading behavior. We can use checklists that help us keep track of and describe students' decoding abilities, sound-symbol knowledge, comprehension strategies, and motivation. We may use the information from checklists to shape instruction to meet individual needs or to share with parents in a conference. Students may benefit from learning the contents of an observational checklist used by their teacher. For example, we may use a checklist to determine whether students are checking to see if they understand each paragraph that they read and if they regularly remind themselves of the purpose for reading a particular text. Using such a checklist in a consistent manner offers students an opportunity to begin to internalize a logical and rigorous means for judging their own comprehension. Our work should focus on helping students practice and then internalize the notion of a mental checklist (based on an explicit model of a helpful checklist) so that it becomes a consistent part of their reading routine.

Paper-and-Pencil Tests

Because paper-and-pencil tests involve considerable dedication of the often-scarce resource of class time, teachers may be reluctant to devote time to teaching reading assessment in relation to such tests. However, paper-and-pencil tests offer an opportunity for useful student discussion about the different purposes for assessment. To the extent that paper-and-pencil tests sample the important outcomes of reading instruction, they may represent the opportunity to help students better understand what they will be assessed with and how the reading assessment maps onto the act of reading. In addition, working on test items that seek to describe vocabulary growth and literal and inferential comprehension may help students better understand the means by which their reading is evaluated. The more clear the relationship between the daily teaching and learning routine of the classroom and the test, the more beneficial a test may be to helping teach students about assessment.

Conclusions

The ability to self-assess is critical for each student's progress toward independent reading. Student independence is a highly valued outcome of reading instruction that is supported by research and encouraged by reading standards. However, teaching reading assessment to foster reading independence does not always receive appropriate attention in the reading classroom. We need to consider the ways and means of helping students develop the ability to self-assess. Existing reading-assessment materials and procedures may provide useful contexts for modeling, explaining, and demonstrating the details of good assessment practice. The findings of comprehension-strategy research suggest that rich models and explanations of good assessment practice by the teacher can contribute to the gradual learning and assumption of reading assessment responsibilities by students. The diverse array of assessment that may be used to teach reading assessment includes teacher feedback, portfolios, performance assessments, teacher checklists, and paper-and-pencil tests. Independence in reading is a critical instructional goal. We need to help students develop independence by explicitly teaching them how to monitor and assess themselves as readers and learners.

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