Reconsidering Reading Levels

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The Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read inquiry concluded that running records and reading level assessments have not been effective in identifying students who need additional support or in providing teachers with accurate information to guide instruction. We now know that there are more effective ways to understand student reading skills and ensure that students are receiving the instruction that they need.

To prevent reading problems, we need to know which students are on track to learn to read easily, and which students will have difficulty. Researchers found that a commonly used levelled assessment tool was only **54% accurate** at predicting students' future reading proficiency. This is just a little bit more accurate than flipping a coin.

No assessment is completely accurate. A commonly used levelled tool, though, has an error rate of +/- 2 levels. This means that if a child's reading level is a G, it actually could be anywhere between an E and I, which is not reliable.

Researchers have examined the reliability of these assessments. One study found that running records underestimate the skills of strong readers, but overestimate the skills of weaker readers.

We know from research what skills students need to learn to be good readers. Running records don't give us specific information on these essential early literacy skills. It is challenging to plan effective literacy instruction based on a reading level, since it doesn't give insight into specific skills and areas of need.

Many running record-based tools stem from three-cueing systems of reading instruction, where students are encouraged to use meaning, sentence structure, and letters to identify words, instead of sounding them out. This approach to teaching reading isn't supported by research.

Early levels of running record-based tools often follow predictable patterns, such as *I see a pencil. I see a table.* These patterned texts implicitly teach students to guess unknown words based on the pattern and the picture, creating the habits of weak readers.

Purposes for Assessment

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> "The primary purpose of assessment is to improve student learning."
> Growing Success, 2010, p. 28

Assessment is a way to answer questions about students and systems. It allows us to provide evidence-based instruction closely aligned with student and system needs, supporting strong reading outcomes for all.

Screening
(Acadience K-6, aimswebPlus, easyCBM)

? What students are at risk?
What systems are at risk?

👥 All students

📅 2 - 3 times per year

📖 Fast, reliable and valid measures of early literacy skills

Diagnostic Assessment
(CORE Phonics, Quick Phonics, Acadience Comprehension, Fluency, & Oral Language)

? What skills are proficient?
What skills need to be taught?

👥 Students who are at risk

📅 Once per year

📖 Longer, often unstandardized measures of specific skills

Progress Monitoring
(Acadience K-6, aimswebPlus, easyCBM)

? Is instruction working?
Do we need to change course?

👥 Students who are receiving additional support

📅 Weekly or biweekly

📖 Very brief measures of skills that are the instructional target

Outcome Evaluation
(Observations, conversations and student products)

? Have students learned what we've taught?

👥 All students

📅 After units of instruction

📖 Evaluation of achievement of curriculum expectations