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Another Look at What's Wrong with Reading Tests

Deborah Meier

A teacher listening to two children read the passage, "He lived in a big house," notes that one read, "He lived in a big apartment" and the other, "He lived in a big horse."¹ Are both equally wrong? In fact, many teachers, like many tests, are prone to consider the latter mistake less serious, since it's "off" by only a single consonant rather than a whole word.

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In our frantic effort to teach children how to beat the testing game we have lost sight of the purpose of reading: to turn the written page into something that makes sense. Tests (formal or informal) are, at best, only symptomatic, a roundabout way of getting some hints as to what students are doing and whether schools are helping them. But the nature of the tests we have devised and our single-minded focus on them have led to a decline in concern for the real act of reading with its power to explain, to influence and to move. (For example, amidst the presumably enormous concern to improve reading in New York City, neighborhood libraries have been cut back to a few hours a day and weekend use has been eliminated.) In order to understand how this is so, we need clarification regarding both the act of reading and the nature of testing. Particularly, we need (1) a definition of what we mean by reading competence, (2) a closer look at the implicit underlying definition of reading that is embodied in current reading tests, and (3) some alternative means of assessing reading that would document better what *is* and direct attention toward what could be.

Toward a Definition of Reading

We pretend—to parents, teachers and children—that it is enough that a child be drilled into changing a set of visual symbols into oral ones. We act as though this action were reading. (It is such a commonly accepted definition of reading that the parents of fluent readers sometimes complain that schools are not teaching their children phonics.) We call this behavior "decoding" although, as linguist Frank Smith points out, actually it is merely translating from one code (visual) into another code (oral).² Such a skill, useful as it may be, is a very trivial one. For example, I can do it for Spanish without being able to understand a thing I am saying.

We are in fact faced with a vast number of students who have made this first translation into oral reading. They can decode, yet they are still at sea. We are all in this fix sometimes when reading something we find difficult. The problem we face is not "breaking the visual to oral code." Our difficulty lies in the subject matter itself or the language used to describe it. At such times we cannot translate the visual or the oral symbols into significant meanings. Turning those marks on the page into meaning is what constitutes reading. To do this means bringing a lot *into* the act of reading quite aside from what we know about the visual marks on the written page.

When a college professor complains that his students these days do not even know how to read, he naturally means (although he may not realize it) that such students *cannot make sense of* the reading material he minimally expects of a college freshman. The distinction between a 12.9 and a 6.9 reader (using the grade-level equivalents of the standardized reading measures), after all, is not that one can read and the other cannot. The difference lies in *what* they can get meaning from or the different sorts of meaning they take from the same material. What changes—or what should change—over time is what we bring to the act of reading.

Many experts have suggested as a definition of reading skill *qua* reading skill (literacy), the closing of the gap between what one can make sense of orally and what one can comprehend visually.³ Given such a closure, the school's task should be to help children make sense out of more of the world.

What Is Happening Back in the Real World?

In the absence of an acceptance of the kind of definition of reading outlined briefly above, the tests themselves have become a kind of implicit definition. When we ask a teacher or parent about a child's reading, they all increasingly fall back on the jargon of test scores. All common-sense judgments are abandoned. Even children begin to judge their reading as though it were merely an extension of testing. And no wonder, when even the best intentioned of us begin to urge children to read *in order* to raise their test scores.

Those children who come to reading easily are the least injured by this, although they too are encouraged to focus narrowly on keeping ahead on the tests. Upper-grade children who are already fluent readers, especially if they are in inner-city schools, are often kept busy filling in blanks and drilling on subskills that might appear on tests while the content of the world is skipped over as a luxury. Good books are used merely to teach test skills: "getting the meaning" or "inferential thinking."

But the children who badly need the teacher's assistance are the most seriously handicapped. While we hammer away at skill tasks that appear on tests, we often deprive these youngsters of the kind of knowledge and language experience that they badly need to *bring to* their reading. Even the skill-tasks themselves are often justified by the teacher only on the grounds that they are necessary for the tests. They too may leave children as much in the dark as ever about how to use their own natural intelligence to work out the relationships between the visual symbols and the world of meaning. Worse still, these tasks convince some children not to trust their own intelligent hypotheses, thus making it virtually impossible for them to develop fluency.

The task of making sense of the written word is a procedure very similar to one all children accomplished just a few years earlier—when they learned to talk. It is well to remember that the children who enter school, including the most disadvantaged, have only recently constructed and verified a set of bewilderingly complex rules that "summarize the relationships and regularities underlying language."⁴ They succeed "even though adults are far from any understanding of what these relationships and regularities are, let alone how to impart them through formal instruction."⁵ They used a process of trial and error—*plenty* of error! To encourage such experimentation we merely supported the never-stop noisemaking and monologue-like conversation of small children. We responded to the sense of what they were saying whenever appropriate. We did not categorize them at each successive stage, isolate the sounds or rules for their practice, count their errors or restrict them on the basis of some prior logical notion of "sequence." We did not

need a test to know if they were progressing or whether indeed they knew “how to talk” when they came to school. We have no comparable grade-level oral language standards—important as oral language is. Nor do we confuse good talking with conscious knowledge of the way language is put together, intriguing as the latter may be.

Reading, like talking, appears to be logically impossible only when we persist in acting as though one needed to know all about it in order to do it. We appear to believe that learning to read requires both a superhuman memory and a quite impossible memory retrieval system. We appear to do so in a period of educational history in which we simultaneously admire the research of Jean Piaget, which leads us to conclude that young children’s thinking is still very concrete and utilizes a form of logic that seems indeed illogical to adults. Yet we try to teach children to read as though they were indeed highly sophisticated and self-conscious computer programmers (and as though our system of written language was “computerable”). That it sometimes appears to work is a credit to the flexibility and tenacity of human intelligence—to pick out what it needs and discard the rest. That it so often does not lead to anything resembling the real act of reading is hardly surprising.

But we persist in this view of our task since the one thing such an approach may indeed succeed in doing, at least in the short turn, is raise reading scores.

Even when children get past the first roadblock and begin to read with some fluency, new obstacles appear in the form of new test-related demands. For what is especially vicious about this test-dominated approach is that it never ends. There are always more tasks that will make you read (i.e., test) even better. At no point along the way is one allowed to say, “Goodness, he reads! On to other things.”

For example, in a study of the Stanford Reading Diagnostic using inner-city Philadelphia seventh-graders, it appeared that many children scored well on the reading comprehension subsection (the only part that comes close to measuring reading *per se*) but were pulled down by low scores on subsections measuring auditory discrimination, blending and syllabication.⁶ Since the youngsters’ final scores reflected the sum of all the parts (and since teachers, children and programs are judged by such final scores), many odd classroom procedures naturally follow.

Conscientious teachers give such children remediation tasks on the subskills they tested poorly on. They do so regardless of any evidence that this will lead to improvement in comprehension. Children are drilled on recognizing similarities between certain isolated sounds. (“Which word,” the teacher might ask, “has the same sound in the middle as ‘rat’—*table*, *run*, *camp* or *seat*?”) They spend hours learning rules to help them decide whether to break “riddle” into “ri-ddle,” “rid-dle” or “ridd-le.” Considerable energy is also spent helping students decipher test instructions, since all these skills will be in vain if the student cannot demonstrate them successfully on the test. Little time remains for reading or for other content areas. The child has been trapped. Any other course seems to court disaster, being labeled “below grade.”

The Tests

It is critical to recognize that a test is based on assumptions regarding what is being measured and why. The difficulty with our reading tests is that we have accepted the machinery of the tests without having questioned whether we agree with their implicit or explicit definition of reading or of reading progress. Even less so have we agreed on how such reading is acquired. (In fact, the testmakers deny having either a definition or a theory. They are merely measurement men.)

The tests are constructed not from an explicit theory of reading but out of an eclectic potpourri of items whose justification lies in the fact that they have a high

degree of correlation with later school success, are consistent with other similar tests, and produce a normal curve. The midpoint along this curve then constitutes what the layman mistakenly assumes is the "should" of reading. Does this sound too slipshod, unfair, unlikely as a description?⁷

In the summer of 1973 a group of respected reading and testing experts met together in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the International Reading Association. They had a hard time agreeing about much, particularly about what to do or say to the public at large. But there was, as one participant noted in summarizing the conference,⁸ virtually unanimous agreement that all the existing normative-based reading tests were without a theoretical rationale, had "little relevance for instruction and were not designed to measure or record educational improvement." The experts agreed that the tests "both mask and distort the real issues involved in the acquisition of reading skill" and that there is today "no definitive knowledge regarding either the sequential learnings or component skills that children must acquire in order to read successfully." They further endorsed the notion that "especially in the acquisition period" reading tests should be "program specific," testing "only what has been directly taught or indirectly fostered."

Alternatives

There are many alternative forms of assessment. No perfect ones exist for all purposes and all programs.⁹ For example, the use of individually administered reading inventories such as the Spache¹⁰ or the Silvaroli¹¹ are a step in the right direction if we want rough comparative data on individual skill. They also can provide some diagnostic information, although so can any teacher who gives attention to a child's reading. Kenneth Goodman's Miscue Inventory¹² is better as a tool for gaining insight into a child's individual approach, although too detailed and complex for everyday use.

Short, program-specific tests designed to fit the activities of a particular classroom or program are manifold. They often come with commercial reading systems, or can be quickly whipped up by a teacher to see if what has been specifically taught has been learned.

Good anecdotal documentation of observed student language and reading is done by many good teachers and researchers and could yield rich information that is both diagnostic and suggestive if we chose to spend our time and money that way.¹³

For obtaining general data on larger populations, programs or trends, particularly beyond the stage of minimal reading acquisition, random sampling techniques applied even to the existing normative-type tests would be preferable. Random sampling would also make alternative, more individualized methods financially feasible and could thereby provide far richer data. Incidentally, it would also avoid the enormous and unbeatable problem of cheating that is encouraged under present circumstances, since it removes both the opportunity and the incentive to coach for the test or cheat during it. The English have, for example, given a short individually administered reading test to a sample population every ten years.¹⁴ While the English system of testing has also received criticism for archaic language as well as methodology, it has at least attempted to develop comparative longitudinal data without distorting the educational process by the evaluation of it.

The problem of assessment, in fact, is so equally well met by other and even cheaper methods than the current mass testings that one is led to conclude that there may be method to this madness.¹⁵

Conclusion

Most standardized reading tests play a negative role. They discourage us from using schools to help children become readers. Those with other resources learn anyway; those least advantaged are as usual stumped.

The tests encourage us to fall for the notion that reading is mostly just a "trick," a useful one for "getting ahead" in the "real world" rather than a means of expanding our understanding of it.

It is well to remember that schools cannot get everyone above the median. It stands to reason, given other facts of life, that the least advantaged will *more likely* fall below the median than above. This natural fact of life is reinforced by the nature of any standardized instrument weighted, as it must be, toward the culture and associative patterns of the mainstream child.¹⁶

Still schools could succeed in making almost all children good readers. This appears otherwise only so long as we define good reading as a point on the normal curve. If we fall for that frame of reference, it is indeed a logical contradiction to seek improvement.

To say there is no intrinsic necessity for the poor to turn off written language is not to pretend that we could alter the class structure, achieve economic and social equality, produce vast changes in patterns of mobility, or "even" reverse the locations of socioeconomic groupings on a normative scale by making all children competent readers. But merely because we cannot achieve all this just by helping children be readers does not mean it is not worth doing.

References

¹This marvelous example was raised by Frank Smith in a seminar on reading held by the City College Workshop in Open Education in May 1974.

²Frank Smith, *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, 1974, and *Understanding Reading*, 1973 (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston). Two superb books describing what is—"musts" for those who take this issue seriously.

³This definition was proposed by one of the working groups at the Georgetown IRA Conference, and primarily was pressed by L. Gleitman (University of Pennsylvania) and T. Sticht (Human Resources Research Organization). It also appears in Herbert Kohl's recent book, *Reading—How To* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973).

⁴⁻⁵Frank Smith, *op. cit.*

⁶Virginia Allen, Triple "T" Project Monograph Series #1, "What Does a Reading Test Test?" (Philadelphia: Temple University College of Education, 1974), pp. 1-21.

⁷Which is not to say that technically the tests are not often carefully and conscientiously, even painstakingly, well put together! The criticism is largely of the rationale, not the skill with which this rationale of testing is pursued.

⁸Report by Anne Bussis of Educational Testing Service, "Memo: For the Record," Dec. 1973.

⁹See excellent summary of this issue, "Consumer Awareness in Test Reviews," by Roger Farr & Wm. Ellery (Washington, DC: Linguistics Institute, Georgetown University, Aug. 1973), mimeo.

¹⁰Diagnostic Reading Scales, devised by George D. Spache (published by Calif. Test Bureau of McGraw-Hill, 1963). Also see Vivienne Garfinkle's guide to this material (published by Project Follow Through, Bank St. College of Education, New York, Feb. 1, 1972).

¹¹Nicholas Silvaroli, *Classroom Reading Inventory*, 2d Ed. (Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown, 1973).

¹²Yetta Goodman & Carolyn Burke, *Reading Miscue Inventory: Procedure for Diagnosis and Evaluation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

¹³The Workshop Center for Open Education, City College of New York, (6 Shepard Hall, Convent Ave. & 140th St., New York City 10031) has published various brochures on reading profiles and other informal evaluation tools. See also studies by Patricia Carini of The Prospect School, North Bennington, VT—e.g., "A Methodology for Evaluating Innovative Programs," June 1969.

¹⁴Note this remarkable rationale for the English system, published in a Department of Education pamphlet (No. 50) in 1966: "Perhaps the strongest arguments in favour of the present test are first that it implies a definition of reading ability that is in accordance with common sense, and secondly that it takes no more than ten minutes of the pupil's time. This economy . . . is valuable, since the business of the school is not to test but to teach. Moreover it is not ten minutes of every pupil's time that is needed."

¹⁵A number of provocative essays on the history of normative-type tests raise important questions regarding the larger social function of looking at children in this particular way. See, for example, "Testing for Order and Control," by Clarence J. Karier, *Educational Theory*, Spring 1972, pp. 159-80.

¹⁶See "Reading Failure and the Tests," by Deborah Meier, City College Workshop Center, An Occasional Paper, Feb. 1973. See also "What's Wrong with the Tests?" by Deborah Meier, Notes from City College Advisory Service to Open Corridors, Mar. 1972, pp. 3-17.