

How well does assessment inform our reading instruction?

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Nowadays the word *assessment* is apt to conjure up unpleasant thoughts of the often acrimonious controversy involving high-stakes testing (e.g., Allington, 2002). As important as we know that debate to be, in our view there is an issue of far greater consequence facing reading educators. To what extent is the instruction they provide informed by the results of assessments? In this column, we will contrast what we believe has long been the norm for assessments with a promising trend spurred by recent U.S. federal initiatives such as Reading First. Like our colleagues in a recent article in this journal (Invernizzi, Landrum, Howell, & Warley, 2005), we see great potential for “peaceful coexistence” between policymakers and teachers when assessments are chosen and used to plan effective instruction.

Consider Ms. Henderson (pseudonym), a conscientious teacher who has taught second grade for many years. Her school has always provided her with a program that offers a variety of materials and resources. This core program includes various assessment tools that help her place students in the series and monitor their progress through unit tests. This teacher does not administer all of the assessments because she feels she lacks the time to conduct them and the expertise to interpret them accurately; nor does her school provide time for her to work with her colleagues to consider these issues. Ms. Henderson’s students progress through the core materials all year, though some of them fall further behind despite her efforts.

At issue is how Ms. Henderson recognizes and addresses the specific needs of each of these stu-

dents during this pivotal time in their development. Her core materials include supplemental strands, but she is uncertain about which students would profit from them, how to schedule such activities, and how to tell when the strands have accomplished their purpose. To complicate matters, she has collected over the years a hodgepodge of specialized materials—workbooks, kits, software, and the like. She sometimes uses these on a trial-and-error basis with her struggling students but has been largely disappointed with the results. Sometimes these materials appear to work, however, and she keeps them as a last-resort measure that might assist some of her children. If they don’t seem to work, she abdicates her instructional responsibility to the Title I or special education teachers. (Title I is a U.S. federally funded program for at-risk students.) Ms. Henderson is, we suspect, typical of teachers trying to make the best of the materials they have in the limited time available to them.

An alternative

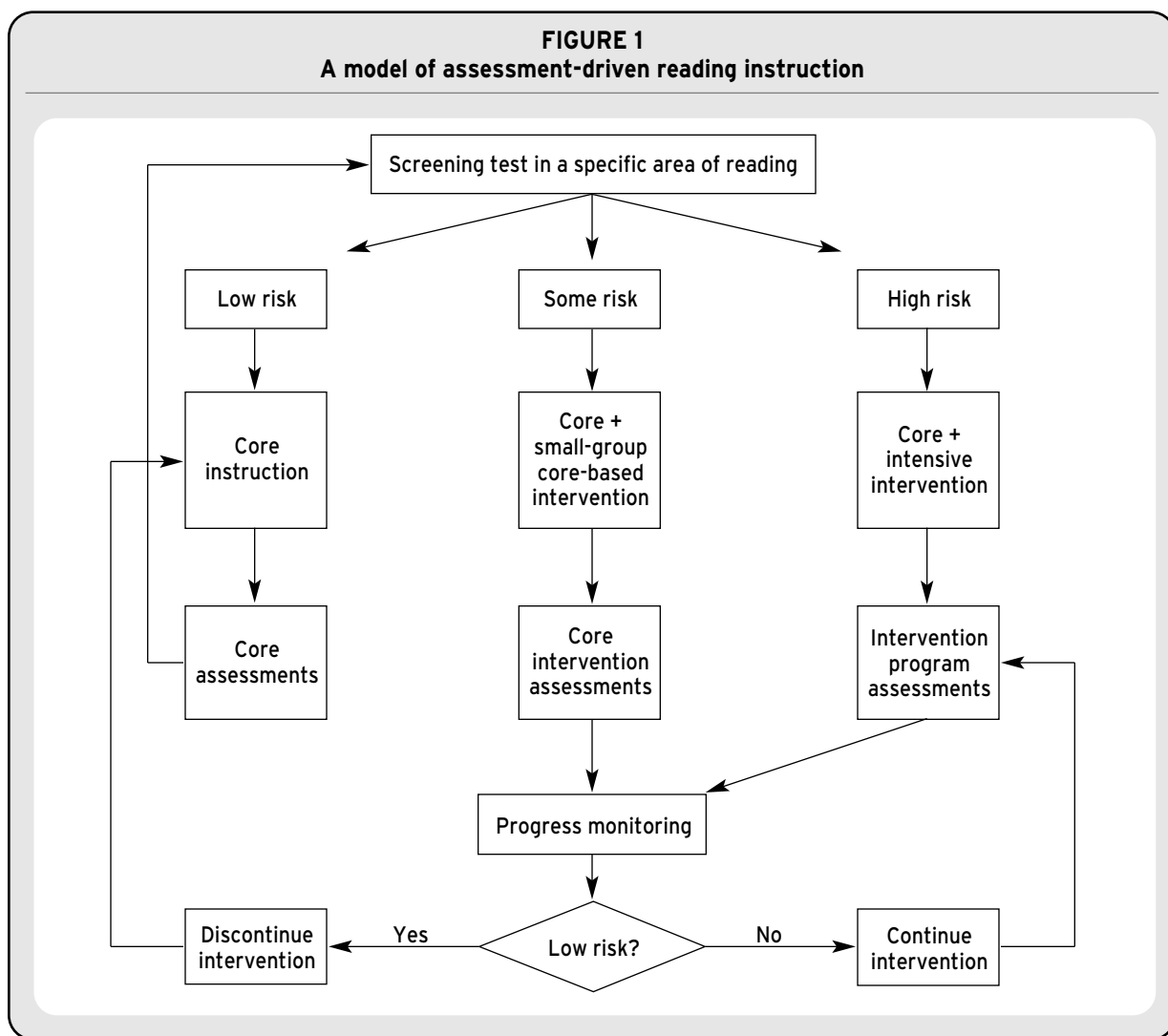
Now let’s contrast this teacher’s approach with the more structured alternative emerging from initiatives like Reading First. We believe that the model of assessment-driven instruction embraced by this reform effort has much to recommend it. It assumes that elementary teachers will be using a core reading program and that additional materials have been purchased, both to supplement weaknesses in the core and to offer intensive intervention in key areas. This is no different from the programs we have

seen in most U.S. schools and classrooms. An expectation, however, is that these materials do not amount to a hodgepodge collected over time but have been carefully selected by school and district representatives to constitute a coherent reading program. The Reading First model further assumes that valid and reliable assessments of various types are in use. These include (a) screening measures to alert classroom teachers to troublesome areas of reading development; (b) diagnostic assessments to aid teachers as they attempt to address the problems identified through screening; (c) progress-monitoring tests to gauge whether instruction and intervention efforts are working; and (d) outcome measures, which include not only those inescapable high-stakes tests but also other indicators as well. These

assessments may be part of the commercial materials used, or they may operate independently of materials. Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (Invernizzi, Meier, & Juel, 2003) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (Good & Kaminski, 2002) are two such measures; for other examples, see Web-based summary documents prepared by the Florida Center for Reading Research (2002–2003) or the Reading First Assessment Committee (Kame'enui, 2002).

The first step

Choosing assessments is only the first step toward using assessments. In Figure 1, we have tried



to capture the assessment-driven instruction model in a decision-making chart. It illustrates how students who do not progress adequately within the core program are identified early through quick, periodic screening measures given at least three times a year. These students are grouped flexibly to receive extra assistance that is planned on the basis of diagnostic assessments that may accompany the program materials. When regular progress-monitoring assessments indicate that their needs have been met, these students return to the mainstream core activities.

We have worked with many elementary school administrators and teachers who are struggling to improve the reading achievement of their students. Some of them “must” use the assessment-driven instruction model because the legislation, in a sense, requires it. However, collecting and reporting the data are a far cry from actually using data to inform instruction for every student. That takes continual support in the form of professional development and collegial collaboration, again mandated but not always realized in Reading First (Walpole & McKenna, 2004). When we work in schools not constrained by Reading First mandates, we still conceptualize assessment in this way, and we still must provide and participate in extensive professional development and collegial collaboration. We suspect that expert teachers of reading have always conceptualized assessment in this manner, and there is compelling evidence that schools successful in meeting the needs of struggling readers gather and use data in structured and systematic ways (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). The assessment model in Reading First may focus our collective attention on issues that have always been part of our work to support student achievement: how best to understand and accelerate the progress of our students.

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The department editor welcomes reader comments.
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