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WHAT'S THE VALUE OF AN IRI? IS IT BEING USED?

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While the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) has long been recommended as a valuable instrument for initial placement of students in reading materials and for diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses in comprehension and word recognition skills (Beldin, 1970), the feasibility of its use by classroom teachers has been questioned because of the time involved. Della-Piana, Jensen, and Murdock (1970) stated that the time factor in the construction, administration, and interpretation of IRIs precluded their frequent use by classroom teachers. However, no data were provided to substantiate their opinion. From a survey among 24 professionals (reading specialists, classroom teachers, media specialists, and one administrator), Johns (1976) reported that the group was evenly split on the usability of the IRI by classroom teachers. "A number of respondents indicated that the use of IRIs by elementary teachers was a problem because of the time involved" (Johns, 1976, p. 12). In contrast, the respondents perceived no problems in the use of the IRI by reading and learning disability specialists in a clinical situation.

Recently, Masztal and Smith (1984) provided some empirical data on the use of IRIs by classroom teachers. While 78% of their 125 respondents indicated that they knew how to administer an IRI, only 54% reported that they actually administered IRIs in their classrooms. Masztal and Smith concluded that, because the IRI was used by over half the teachers in their sample, teacher educators were justified in spending large amounts of time necessary to instruct preservice teachers in the administration and interpretation of an IRI. However, their questionnaire did not address the frequency of IRI use.

As teacher educators, we have for some time had a nagging concern that we were spending an inordinate proportion of time in our undergraduate corrective reading course teaching a procedure (i.e. the IRI) that classroom teachers would seldom use once they were in the classroom. This concern, which grew out of informal contacts with teachers and observations in "real" classrooms, led us to the current study.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent is the IRI used for the purpose of initial placement of students in reading materials?
2. To what extent do classroom teachers and support specialists value the IRI as a means of providing diagnostic information about students' reading levels (subsequent to initial placement), oral reading ability, comprehension ability, and word recognition skills?
3. How frequently do classroom teachers and support specialists administer an IRI to obtain diagnostic information?
4. What is the relationship between classroom teachers' and support specialists' frequency use of the IRI for diagnostic purposes and their value ratings of the IRI as a diagnostic instrument?

Method

Subjects

The sample ($N = 343$) consisted of 280 (82%) classroom teachers and 63 (18%) support specialists in grades K-6. The category of support specialists included personnel who worked with students outside the classroom (reading and learning disability specialists, guidance counselors, etc.) and curriculum specialists who worked primarily with teachers. The respondents were in 11 Florida counties of varying population size and characteristics. Two counties ($n = 174$) were large urban centers with a population range of 650,000 to 750,000. Five counties ($n = 93$) ranged from 150,000 to 300,000 in population and were a mixture of small cities and rural areas. The remaining 4 counties ($n = 76$) had under 50,000 population and were primarily rural in nature.

The subjects' years of educational experience were as

follows: 1-4 years (14%), 5-9 years (22%), 10-14 years (25%), and 15+ years (39%). Ages were 21-30 (19%), 31-40 (40%), and 41+ (41%). Ninety-four percent were female and 6% were male.

The breakdown of the 280 classroom teachers according to grade level was: K, 27 (10%); Grade 1, 65 (23%); Grade 2, 40 (14%); Grade 3, 47 (17%); Grade 4, 46 (16%); Grade 5, 34 (12%); and Grade 6, 21 (8%).

Materials

The questionnaire was designed to determine the value and frequency of use of a number of diagnostic procedures, among which were five items specifically related to the IRI. The use of a number of diagnostic procedures masked our primary interest (for this study) in the IRI; that is, we hoped to alleviate the problem of participants' responding favorably to the researchers' obvious topic of interest.

The questionnaire was comprised of three major parts: (a) the use of information from four different data sources (one of which was the IRI) for placing students in reading materials when they entered a new grade level or when they transferred into a school; (b) 10 statements related to the value of the use of diagnostic procedures, rated on a 7-point scale; and (c) 7 statements related to **the frequency** of use of the same diagnostic procedures, rated on a 7-point scale. As can be seen in the questionnaire (see Appendix), value statements 2, 6, 7, and 10, and frequency statement 2 were concerned with the IRI.

Procedure

We identified Florida counties of varying population size and characteristics (as previously described) in order to have a sample somewhat representative of the state's population of teachers. The counties were geographically distributed over the state.

In order to maximize the percentage of questionnaires returned, we sent packets of questionnaires to key persons known to the researchers in the identified counties. A cover letter requested that they distribute the questionnaires to selected school faculties in their counties and return the questionnaires when they were completed. A large stamped, self-addressed return envelope was included for

their convenience. This procedure resulted in a return of 343 questionnaires (85%).

Results

Use of Four Data Sources for Placement

Table 1 presents the number and percent of respondents who reported using each of four data sources (IRI, basal placement tests, former basal book placements, and achievement tests) to place students in reading materials when they entered a new grade level or when they transferred into the school. According to these results, the IRI was used slightly more often than the other three data sources to obtain information for initial pupil placement in reading materials. However, the percentages of use of the first three sources were very similar.

Table 1
Number and Percent of Respondents Using Data Sources
for Placement Decisions

Data sources	<u>n</u>	%
IRI	214	62
Basal placement tests	204	59
Former basal book placements	198	58
Achievement tests	121	35

Note-- Totals add to more than 100% because many respondents checked more than one data source.

Value and Frequency of Use of the IRI for Diagnostic Purposes

As can be seen in Table 2, classroom teachers' mean ratings of the four IRI value statements clustered around the rating of 5, "Often Valuable." Support specialists' mean value ratings were slightly higher than those of the classroom teachers, but they could still be characterized by the "Often Valuable" descriptor.

Frequency of IRI use for diagnostic purposes is presented in Table 3. For purposes of comparison respondents were classified into one of three categories based on their

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Respondents'
Value Ratings of the IRI for Diagnostic Purposes

Value statements*	Classroom teachers		Support specialists	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
(2) Reading levels	5.16	1.25	5.32	1.20
(6) Oral reading	5.12	1.32	5.45	1.18
(7) Comprehension	4.93	1.38	5.16	1.36
(10) Word recognition	5.39	1.21	5.53	1.17

Note--Means and standard deviations are based on a 7-point rating scale.

* Numbers in parentheses refer to item number on the questionnaire (see Appendix).

Table 3
Number and Percent of Respondents'
Frequency of Use of the IRI for Diagnostic Purposes

Frequency of use*	Classroom teachers		Support specialists	
	<u>n</u> (275)	%	<u>n</u> (62)	%
Low	168	61	29	49
Moderate	84	31	18	29
High	23	8	15	24

* Low use = "Never happens" or "Happens less than once per semester." Moderate use = "Happens less than once o per month" or "Happens less than once per week." High use = "Happens once per week," "Happens two-four. . ." ". . . five or more times per week."

reported frequency of use of the IRI, as explained above.

Almost two-thirds of the classroom teachers indicated low use while slightly less than half of the support specialists fell in this category. Percentages of moderate use were similar for both groups, approximately 30%. While one

fourth of the support specialists indicated high use, only one-twelfth of the classroom teachers did so.

To determine whether respondents in different frequency of use categories valued the IRI differently, data were subjected to separate one-way analysis of variance procedures for classroom teachers and support specialists, respectively. For each of the two respondent groups four different analyses were performed, using as dependent measures

Table 4
Frequency of Use Group Means and F Tests on Respondents'
Value Ratings of the IRI for Diagnostic Purposes

Value statements	Frequency of use groups			
	Low	Moderate	High	<u>F</u>
Classroom teachers*				
(2) Reading levels	5.04	5.25	5.52	1.88
(6) Oral reading	4.93	5.26	5.74	4.66 ^a
(7) Comprehension	4.83	4.96	5.35	1.45
(10) Word recognition	5.21	5.56	5.74	3.45 ^b
Support specialists**				
(2) Reading levels	5.14	5.50	5.40	0.55
(6) Oral reading	5.48	5.56	5.27	0.26
(7) Comprehension	4.93	5.39	5.40	0.89
(10) Word recognition	5.55	5.17	5.33	0.54

* n = 168 (Low), 84 (Moderate), 23 (High). ** n = 29
(Low), 18 (Moderate), 15 (High)

^bp < .05. ^ap < .02.

value ratings of the IRI for providing information on students' (a) reading levels, (b) oral reading ability, (c) comprehension ability, and (d) word recognition skills.

Table 4 reports the means and overall F values for each analysis by respondent group. The results of these analyses show significant omnibus F tests (p < .05) in two

instances (oral reading and word recognition) for the classroom teacher data only. Scheffe's post hoc test was utilized to make pairwise comparisons between the means of usage groups (low, moderate, high) to determine which groups differed significantly in their value ratings of the IRI. In only one instance was a significant difference observed between pairs of individual group means. Classroom teachers in the high frequency of use category perceived the IRI as significantly more valuable as a tool for providing information on students' oral reading ability than teachers in the low frequency of use category, $F(2,272) = 4.66$, $p < .02$.

Discussion

For this sample of 280 classroom teachers and 63 support specialists, the IRI was a major data source for initially placing students in reading materials; however, it was used only slightly more than basal placement tests and former basal book placements. Our questionnaire did not ask who administered the placement instruments, but many classroom teachers wrote in the margin that support specialists were responsible for placement decisions. Though both groups of respondents appeared to recognize equally the value of the IRI as a diagnostic instrument, classroom teachers indicated a much lower level of actual use.

When the relationship between frequency of IRI use for diagnostic purposes and value ratings of the IRI as a diagnostic instrument was examined, we found that classroom teachers who used the IRI frequently valued it significantly higher than those teachers who used it infrequently or not at all, but only for diagnosing oral reading ability. There were no significant differences between use categories in the value ratings of the IRI as an instrument for determining students' reading levels (subsequent to initial placement), comprehension ability, and word recognition skills. It seems that, if teacher educators are going to spend instructional time on the IRI, and if they want to encourage its use, they must place the emphasis on the different kinds of diagnostic information that it can provide.

This survey indicated that, for one reason or another, the IRI was not frequently used by classroom teachers. While our questionnaire was not designed to determine classroom teachers' reasons for not using an IRI, it is logical to assume, as suggested by the literature, that

lack of time was a major factor. If the IRI is seldom going to be used by classroom teachers, we question the practice of teaching its administration and interpretation in a one semester corrective reading course for preservice teachers. The inordinate amount of time required for students to achieve proficiency in the use of an IRI might better be spent in showing students how to obtain diagnostic information at the same time as they are instructing groups of children in the regular reading program. Klesius and Searls (1986) have suggested a number of ways that this might be accomplished and have provided tabulation forms to facilitate the process of recording individual student responses in a group situation. While group assessment cannot provide as much information as individual testing with an IRI, the probability that teachers would actually carry out such assessment appears to be greater. However, the acceptance of this hypothesis will depend on further empirical verification.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire: Value and Frequency of Use of Diagnostic Procedures

We are in the process of revising the content of our undergraduate and graduate courses that include the diagnosis of reading problems. We need your input as to which diagnostic procedures are most valuable and how frequently you use them.

Regular classroom teacher, 1985-86: _____ County _____

Other than regular classroom teacher, 1985-86: _____
Grade(s) _____ Title _____

Please circle: _____
Years of experience: 1-4 5-9 10-14 15+
Age: 21-30 31-40 41 or older
Sex: M F

Which of the following is (are) used to place children in reading materials when they enter a new grade level or when they transfer into the school?

_____ Basal placement tests _____ Achievement test
_____ Informal reading inventory _____ Former basal book placement

Directions: Please respond to each statement below in terms of how valuable you perceive the use of each diagnostic procedure to be.

Value of Use

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 = Never Valuable | 5 = Often Valuable |
| 2 = Very Seldom Valuable | 6 = Very Often Valuable |
| 3 = Seldom Valuable | 7 = Always Valuable |
| 4 = Sometimes Valuable | |

- _____ 1. Parent interviews are valuable for identifying children's reading strengths and weaknesses.
- _____ 2. Informal reading inventories are valuable for indentifying students' reading levels.
- _____ 3. Cumulative records are valuable for identifying students' reading levels.
- _____ 4. The last basal book completed by the student is valuable for identifying his/her reading level.
- _____ 5. Standardized reading achievement tests are valuable for providing diagnostic information.
- _____ 6. Informal reading inventories are valuable for providing information about oral reading ability.
- _____ 7. Informal reading inventories are valuable for providing information about students' ability to comprehend.
- _____ 8. Standardized achievement tests are valuable for identifying the reading level at which students can perform.
- _____ 9. Observation of oral reading behaviors is valuable for providing information about students' word recognition skills.
- _____ 10. Informal reading inventories are valuable for providing information about students' word recognition skills.

Directions: Please respond to each statement below in terms of how frequently you use the diagnostic procedure referred to.

Frequency of Use

- 1 = Never happens
- 2 = Happens less than once per semester
- 3 = Happens less than once per month
- 4 = Happens less than once per week
- 5 = Happens once per week
- 6 = Happens two-four times per week
- 7 = Happens five or more times per week

- _____ 1. I refer to standardized test results for diagnostic information.
- _____ 2. I administer an informal reading inventory to get diagnostic information.
- _____ 3. I refer to cumulative records for diagnostic information.
- _____ 4. I refer to the results of the basal skills tests for diagnostic information.
- _____ 5. I have parent interviews to get diagnostic information.
- _____ 6. I use oral reading to gain diagnostic information.
- _____ 7. I use worksheets (workbook or ditto) to gain diagnostic information.