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USING TEACHER OBSERVATION FOR DIAGNOSING READING PROBLEMS

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The accurate diagnosis of a child's reading problems certainly is a necessity in today's elementary classrooms. Each child is much more than a member of a reading achievement group. He also is an individual whose specific reading strengths and weaknesses must be identified so that appropriate corrective reading instruction can be provided for him. Perhaps the easiest and the most effective diagnostic technique is teacher observation.

This article discusses the values of using teacher observation as a diagnostic technique and illustrates how a teacher can be more effective in the diagnosis of reading problems. The article discusses using cumulative records and several different types of checklists as useful aids to teacher observation. Some of the checklists discussed are extremely valuable in locating a child's specific reading difficulties, but are not widely known by many elementary teachers.

Diagnosis By Teacher Observation

In some ways observation is the most useful way of diagnosing each individual child's reading problems for the typical elementary teacher. Teacher observation can take place whenever a child is reading silently or orally and when he is learning any of the word recognition or comprehension skills. Teacher observation should be an ongoing, continuous process which determines each child's reading strengths and weaknesses and therefore points the way toward corrective teaching of certain reading skills. These, then, are the reading skills which should be thoroughly retaught before a child's reading difficulties become complex.

Using Cumulative Records to Aid Observation

Diagnosis of reading problems by teacher observation can well begin by the examination of a child's cumulative records. These records allow the teacher to obtain information which will help her best to meet the instructional needs of an entire group of pupils. For example, she may find from examining the cumulative records of her entire class that one reading achievement group is weak in phonetic analysis skills. She then can provide corrective instruction in these skills for this entire group.

Moreover, the cumulative records are helpful in identifying individuals in the classroom who will need special help either in one or more areas of reading instruction or from the reading specialist in the elementary school. After using the child's records, the teacher can make some assumptions about his reading development which can be either verified or rejected by using another technique of observation.

Diagnosis By Teacher Observation Using a Checklist

Teacher observation often employs the observable reading behavior of a child. Each child's various reading skills should be observed individually, and the teacher should record the results of the observation. Such observation of reading progress can be done without a structured aid, but a checklist can be of great value in directing teacher observation of reading skills. A checklist can provide the teacher with a list of significant reading behaviors, specific reading difficulties, and a convenient form for recording the results of an observation. A teacher can use a checklist which has been developed by a reading specialist, but she should adapt it to the developmental reading program found in her own school. Some of these checklists are described in a later section of this paper. A teacher also can develop her own reading checklist to guide observation if she is familiar enough with the reading process.

A checklist or scale can be used to evaluate reading readiness ability very well. For example, the following scale can be used to help a teacher evaluate a child's ability to interpret pictures.

SCALE FOR EVALUATING A CHILD'S LANGUAGE ABILITY IN INTERPRETING PICTURES

Teacher asks the student: "What is this picture about?"

Record his verbal response and classify its level on these steps.

The use of the tape recorder will be of value for this.

- Step I The child merely shrugs his shoulders and does not reply. He may say man, dog, etc.
- Step II The child describes what the characters are doing.
- Step III The child expresses a relationship between the characters or objects.
- Step IV The child sees the picture as one part of a narrative. He gives relationships of time, place, cause-effect.
- Step V The child reacts to the mood of the picture, perceives the

emotional reactions of the characters, and draws a conclusion or evaluates the actions.

Students who have not reached STEP III or STEP IV on this scale can scarcely have developed sufficient language ability to interpret a picture in the textbook and react to the narrative text that accompanies the picture.

Checklists can be found in the reading readiness workbooks or in the preprimers of most basal reader series. Wilma Miller has also developed a checklist which can be found in the book *The First R: Elementary Reading Today*. (3) Another very fine checklist, designed to aid teacher observation at the reading readiness level, was developed by Walter Barbe as part of his entire reading skills checklist series which he has recommended for use in the individualized reading plan. This reading readiness checklist, however, can just as well be used to help direct observation of readiness when the basal reader approach is used.

There are a number of excellent checklists to aid teacher observation of reading strengths and weaknesses in both the primary and intermediate grades. All of these can be used to help a teacher evaluate the reading skills of both good and average readers who are learning to read by any of the approaches. Such checklists also can be used with disabled readers who should receive diagnosis and correction of their reading difficulties either in the classroom or in the clinic. As an example, many reading specialists consider the checklist found in the individual diagnostic reading test, *The Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty*, to be most effective in guiding teacher observation of a child's oral reading strengths and weaknesses. (2) This checklist can be found on the inside cover of the test. It also is reprinted in several books such as *Identifying and Correcting Reading Difficulties in Children* by Wilma Miller. (4)

Walter Barbe, as mentioned before, has developed an entire reading skills checklist series. These may be found in his book *An Educator's Guide to Personalized Reading Instruction*. (1)

Another valuable checklist is entitled "The Reading Progress Profile" and was first published in *Elementary English* in 1951. This profile is a series of checklists which can give a continuous picture of each child's reading. Since this profile accompanies each child as he progresses through the elementary school, it can provide the teacher with a picture of his reading growth. (5)

Another very good checklist of observations about a child's reading

which can help the teacher to evaluate his reading assets and limitations is found in Ruth Strang's book *Diagnostic Teaching of Reading*. Different parts of this checklist can be used to evaluate a pupil's silent reading, oral reading, dramatization of stories, and presentation of oral reports. (8)

George and Evelyn Spache also include a good checklist in their recent book *Reading in the Elementary School*. A part of this checklist can help a teacher to observe a child's oral reading behavioral subskills under the main skill areas of Fluency, Word Attack, and Posture. Part of this same checklist can help a teacher accurately observe a child's phonetic analysis skills in the areas of Consonants, Vowels, and Other Phonetic Analysis Skills. (7)

The Webster Publishing Company has published a very fine and well-known checklist which is primarily designed for use with readers who have difficulties in the elementary school. This checklist is called *The Reading Troubleshooter's Checklist* and can be used with a disabled reader. It includes behavioral characteristics in the various word recognition skills; it evaluates the skills of phonetic analysis, structural analysis, and context clues in detail; and it has a section to judge a child's reading comprehension. The chart for recording a child's performance in each of these skills which is included as part of the checklist is of great value. (6)

Using the Results of Teacher Observation

By the use of cumulative records, by informal teacher observation of a child's reading, and by directed teacher observation of reading skills, the child's individual strengths and weaknesses can be ascertained.

When the observations have been noted, the teacher must capitalize on each child's reading strengths and try to correct any of his reading problems. Corrective reading instruction should take place either on an individual basis or in a "needs" group. It will do a child little good for his teacher to diagnose his reading difficulties accurately if she does not provide systematic corrective reading instruction to overcome these specific difficulties. He then will not be so likely to have his minor reading difficulties "snowball" into major reading problems which require instruction from a reading specialist.

Summary

The diagnosis of reading performance by teacher observation is one of the most useful ways to determine a child's reading strengths and

weaknesses. Teacher observation can be directed by the use of a child's cumulative records or a good checklist. Each child should then be provided with corrective reading instruction in the light of these specific difficulties.

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