

Taking Running Records

*A teacher shares her experience on how to take
running records and use what they tell you to assess
and improve every child's reading*

S C H O L A S T I C
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Assessing Reading Growth With Running Records

“Yet a funny thing happens on the way to those final assessments: day-to-day learning takes place. I am certain that, in education, evaluation needs to pay more attention to the systematic observation of learners who are on their way to those final assessments.”

(Clay, 1987, p. 1)

Step-by-step assessment of children’s learning can be the stitch in time that makes the difference for young readers. As I watch my students day to day and throughout the year, they reveal their understanding in words and performances. By documenting facts that accumulate and strengths that emerge, I can integrate what I learn to create a complete picture of each child’s level of competence as the year progresses. Reflecting on this knowledge, I can direct my teaching to give appropriate support in a timely way—to plan lessons to reteach, reinforce, or extend learning. I can adjust the sequence of instruction to take advantage of teachable moments that increase the children’s motivation and the likelihood that they will be successful learners.

The methods and purpose of such ongoing, classroom-based assessment differ notably from the external, standardized tests schools traditionally depend on to confirm literacy growth. Those tests yield information for curriculum development. They identify strengths and weaknesses in a district’s program when grade and school scores are compared to regional, state, and national norms. They also identify where a child stands in comparison to other students and generate reference points for a child’s academic growth in core curricular areas over an extended period of time. However, when such norm-referenced scores are used to examine an indi-

vidual learner's achievement, supporting or contradicting evidence based on day-to-day classroom assessment should be provided. But why wait until traditional standardized tests indicate that children have gotten lost in their literacy development when immediate assessments can reveal a need for intervention?

Teachers have always watched their students' development, but have not always trusted the reliability of their observations. This lack of confidence is gradually dissipating as systematic observation becomes a more acceptable method of assessment, particularly in early childhood education (Barr, Craig, Fisette, & Syverson, 1999; Clay, 1993; "Primary Language Record," 1989). Teachers are now using a variety of formalized classroom observational practices to gather evidence of achievement as children go about the business of learning in the comfort of a classroom setting. Consistent guidelines and routines ensure detailed analysis of literacy growth across settings. Effective tools, systematically applied in the assessment process, are integral to the overall validity of information classroom teachers can gather. Running records (RR) are one such tool.

What Are Running Records?

In *An Observational Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (1993), Marie Clay presents the running record, a method she developed for determining a child's reading competence at a given moment in time with a specific level and type of book. To create a running record, the teacher sits with the child and uses specific shorthand, or codes, to record detailed information while the child reads aloud. The resulting record provides the teacher with a playback of an entire oral reading episode, including the smallest details on the reader's attitude, demeanor, accuracy, and understanding. With the record in hand, the teacher can analyze behaviors, responses, competencies, initiatives taken, and understanding of the specific content and task. Because these codes are standardized, they are consistent across settings and among teachers.

The teacher uses the running record to calculate scores, analyze errors, and document strategies the child uses to successfully decode words and construct meaning. The notations, although in shorthand, are detailed enough to provide a multi-layered account of the child's performance in oral reading, comprehension of main idea and details, and ability to interpret and draw logical conclusions when reading different kinds of books (i.e., story, informational, poetry).

The Benefits of Using Running Records

They Are Authentic

Authenticity in assessment refers to the degree that the instrument used and the information gained from it measure the child's performance of a particular skill in *everyday* use. If the instrument, content, or format of an assessment task differs considerably from the way the child uses the skill in routine situations, the information is flawed and should not be used. An authentic assessment such as running records creates a unique and detailed picture as the interaction between teacher and learner unfolds. For the child, such interactive assessment is "just another practice of what I do all the time." The only difference is that the teacher is giving greater attention to the child and will be making notations during the performance. Conversations that arise focus on the content of the task, though the child may make comments about some other aspect of her reading that the teacher can make note of and follow up on later. This kind of collaboration is a cornerstone of authentic assessment—assessment that will enable children to gradually monitor their own learning.

They Create a Dialogue Between Teacher and Student

The first few times I take a running record with a child, I explain why we're doing it, what she needs to do, and what I'll be doing. For example:

Today I'd like you to read aloud for me while the other [children] are working. While you read from this book on spiders, I'll be making marks for the words you say. I want to see how smoothly you read—if you read in phrases that sound like talking—and how you figure out words, how you use expression and how you pay attention to punctuation. When you get to this page, you can stop and tell me all about what you read, as if I were someone who had never heard it before. You'll be showing me what you can already do and what I should help you with next. When you're finished, I'll show you the marks and explain what they mean.

Explaining what's happening keeps the recording from being a mystery to the child and allays any fears she may have about being graded or judged; the child trusts that the teacher will explain the marks. After children have experienced the process and observed me working with others a few times, explanations become less necessary.

A powerful—and joyful—side effect of this assessment process is the opportunity for teacher-student bonding. The child is performing solo—soaking up positive attention from the teacher. The relationship becomes stronger, and the child is more willing to accept the teacher's suggestions for improvement in this climate. The dialogue that accompanies the interaction guides the child's thinking about what a reader does to construct

meaning and strengthens her ability to assess her own performance.

They Celebrate Strengths

When the child completes the reading and has retold the story, the teacher shares and discusses the record with her. The discussion starts with compliments that illustrate exactly what the child did well: *Your reading was smooth and you grouped words together this time to make it sound more like talking. I liked the way you used expression in the scary part.*

They Provide the Child With Immediate, Detailed Feedback

After pointing out strengths, the teacher gives feedback that includes sensitively stated comments on specific areas of difficulty. Teacher and child discuss errors (miscues) made in the reading. The analysis includes scaffolded corrections pointing out how the error could have been avoided or self-corrected. For example:

Teacher: You skipped this word when you read. Here's where I marked it as a missed word. Do you know it?

Child: No.

T: How can you figure it out?

C: Sound it out?

T: You can look at the letters and think about the sounds for those letters. What else can you think about that will help you figure it out?

C: Use the Clunk list (see list on page 17).

Mmmmm...think about what's happening. Look at the picture.

T: Those are good places for clues that you can match with the sound clues. Reread this part and use your ideas to figure it out.

C: The dinosaur had a strong, mmm.../sh/...mmmmm...oh I know—sharp beak, because...look...it's pointed in the picture and he's cutting the branch with it!

T: Good for you! You thought about what other word would describe his beak and looked at the illustration for clues to match the starting /sh/ sound.

Sometimes I use this kind of teachable moment to conduct an on-the-spot mini-lesson. For example:

T: Keep in mind what the part you're reading is mostly about and use picture clues. This will make it easier to figure out words as you go. The word can't be any word in the world. It has to make sense and sound right—like the way we talk in a sentence. If your brain is expecting certain words because of what it's all about, your eyes will recognize the word faster when you see it—even just the first few letters of it.