There’s No Such Thing as a Reading Test

BY E. D. HIRSCH, JR., AND ROBERT PONDISCIO

It is among the most common of nightmares. You dream of taking a test for which you are completely unprepared—you’ve never studied the material or even attended the course. For millions of American schoolchildren, it is a nightmare from which they cannot wake, a trial visited upon them each year when the law requires them to take reading tests with little preparation. Sure, formally preparing for reading tests has become more than just a ritual for schools. It is practically their raison d’être! Yet students are not prepared in the way they need to be.

Schools and teachers may indeed be making a Herculean effort to raise reading scores, but for the most part these efforts do little to improve reading achievement and prepare children for college, a career, and a lifetime of productive, engaged citizenship. This wasted effort is not because our teachers are of low quality. Rather, too many of our schools have fundamental misconceptions about reading comprehension—how it works, how to improve it, and how to test it.

Reading, like riding a bike, is typically thought of as a skill we acquire as children and generally never lose. When you think about your ability to read—if you think about it at all—the chances are good that you perceive it as not just a skill, but a readily transferable skill. Once you learn how to read, you can competently read a novel, a newspaper article, or the latest memo from your bank. Reading is reading is reading. Either you can do it, or you cannot.

As explained in the articles on pages 3 and 30, this view of reading is only partially correct. The ability to translate written symbols into sounds, commonly called “decoding,” is indeed a skill that can be taught and mastered. This explains why you are able to “read” nonsense words such as “rigfap” or “churbit.” But to be fully literate is to have the communicative power of language at your command—to read, write, listen, and speak with understanding.

Cognitive scientists describe comprehension as domain specific. If a baseball fan reads “A-Rod hit into a 6-4-3 double play to end the game,” he needs not another word to understand that the New York Yankees lost when Alex Rodriguez came up to bat with a man on first base and one out and then hit a ground ball to the shortstop, who threw to the second baseman, who relayed to first in time to catch Rodriguez for the final out. If you’ve never heard of A-Rod or a 6-4-3 double play and cannot reconstruct the game situation in your mind’s eye, you are not a poor reader. You merely lack the domain-specific vocabulary and knowledge of baseball needed to fill in the gaps. Even simple texts, like those on reading tests, are riddled with gaps—domain knowledge and vocabulary that the writer assumes the reader knows.

Think of reading as a two-lock box, requiring two keys to open. The first key is decoding skills. The second key is vocabulary sufficient to understand what is being decoded. Reading comprehension tests are basically vocabulary tests. The verbal portion of the Armed Forces Qualification Test—which predicts income level, job performance, and much else—is chiefly a vocabulary test. So, to lift us out of our low performance compared with other nations, narrow the achievement gap between groups, and offer low-income students a way out of poverty, all we need to do is greatly increase students’ vocabularies. That’s it.

Sounds great, but it is misleadingly facile, since vocabulary size is increased only trivially by explicit word study, and most word learning is slow and imperceptible. But, as Marilyn Jager Adams has shown (see page 3), it is much faster when teachers stay on a topic long enough to inculcate new knowledge, thereby creating a familiar context for learning new words. As a result, the only road to a large vocabulary is the gradual, cumulative acquisition of knowledge. Our minds are so formed that we can rarely know things without knowing the words for them, nor can we know words without knowing the

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cert with current efforts by several teams of researchers and practitioners to develop improved test and nontest measures of teaching quality. When we look beyond tests alone to meet our information and accountability needs, a wide range of better options become available.

Of course, any supplemental measure should be evaluated using the same criteria for validity and reliability that are applied to test-based measures, and unintended consequences should be identified and addressed. One potential advantage of nontest indicators, such as peer and administrator observations and critiques of instruction, is that they might serve a more useful professional development function than test scores have, by providing teachers with clear, constructive feedback on their teaching. But if new measures (or rubrics) are used for both professional development and accountability purposes, investigations need to be designed to examine the validity of scores from those measures in light of each of those purposes, as well as the consequences that arise. Some problems, such as the tendency to focus on what is measured at the expense of what is not measured, are unlikely to be eliminated completely, so it will be important to monitor for undesirable consequences and modify the system as necessary to address them.

Second, for assessment and accountability to be useful, policymaking must consider ways to improve the quality of informa-