Reading Tests: What They Measure, and Don't Measure

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http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/test.read.farrall.htm

Note: *The information in this article is from Chapter 10 and 11, Tests and Measurements 101 and 102, in Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy, 2nd edition published by Harbor House Law Press.*

Learning What Tests Measure

There are two important realities in testing. Tests do not always measure what they appear to measure, and not all tests measure reading, writing, and math skills comprehensively.

Reading comprehension, for example, is a complex entity. Although we may think of it as a single skill or a single subtest score, students with poor reading comprehension may struggle with a variety of deficits.

Some children may not understand as well when they read silently as when they read aloud. Some children may have difficulty understanding what they have read because they work too hard at word recognition. Other students may have gaps in their phonics skills and may not recognize words with accuracy.

It is important to understand exactly what the child's weaknesses are before designing an effective remedial program.

Learning About Reading Tests

There is no one reading test that measures reading skills comprehensively. Different reading tests measure different types of reading skills. Some tests that measure different skills in reading are briefly described below.

Woodcock Reading Mastery Test - Revised (WRMT-R)

*The **Woodcock Reading Mastery Test – Revised (WRMT-R)** is a commonly used educational achievement test. The WRMT-R has two forms and includes several subtests.*

***Letter Identification**. Children are required to name a random selection of upper and lower case letters that are written in a variety of fonts.*

***Word Identification.** Children are required to read words in a list format aloud. They have five seconds to identify each word before they are prompted to move on to the next word.*

***Nonsense Words**. Children are required to read words that are not real. Nonsense words allow the evaluator to determine how the child recognizes words without using compensatory strategies (i.e., looking at pictures, guessing based upon context, or reading words by sight).*

Children have five seconds to respond before they are prompted for a response, and then moved on to the next word.

***Word Comprehension**. This subtest has three sections: antonyms (word opposites), synonyms (words with the same meaning), and analogies (up is to down as slow is to fast).*

Children have fifteen seconds before they are prompted for a response, and then moved on to the next item. Children who have weaknesses in word finding or word retrieval may have difficulty with this task.

***Passage Comprehension**. Children are required to read passages to themselves, then fill in the blanks to demonstrate their understanding.*

This type of reading comprehension test can be challenging for children with expressive language disorders. The fill-in-the-blank format requires a precise understanding of sentence structure and grammar, and the ability to retrieve the exact word needed.

Children have approximately thirty seconds after reading the passage to respond.

Gray Oral Reading Test, Fourth Edition (GORT-4)

*The **Gray Oral Reading Test, Fourth Edition (GORT-4)** measures oral reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension. Information about rate and accuracy is important because children who read slowly take longer to complete assignments and understand and remember less of what they have read.*

On the GORT-4, after the child reads a series of passages aloud, the child's oral reading is scored for rate and accuracy. After reading each passage, the child is asked to answer multiple choice questions that are read by the examiner.

Children may do poorly or well for a variety of reasons.

For children with expressive language challenges, multiple choice questions may permit them to express what they know more easily. Children who have weak memories may have difficulty holding the choices (A,B,C, or D) in memory for consideration. Some children can answer questions correctly by relying on their verbal thinking skills, not on what they actually understood by reading.

Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Second Edition (KTEA-2)

*The **Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Second Edition (KTEA-2)** is another achievement battery that measures some, but not all, of the important skills in reading. The reading subtests include the following:*

***Letter & Word Recognition**. Children are required to identify letters and words in list format. There is no time limit.*

***Nonsense Word Decoding**. Children are required to identify nonsense words. There is no time limit.*

***Reading Comprehension**. Children read passages aloud or silently, then answer multiple choice questions and open ended questions that they must read for themselves. Open ended questions are scored on the basis on content, not on form, sentence structure, or grammar. There are no time limits.*

***Decoding Fluency**. Children are asked to read nonsense words while being timed.*

***Word Recognition Fluency**. Children are asked to read real words while being timed.*

You can see from these three tests that there is considerable variation from one reading test to another.

You need to know what tests measure and how tests are administered. You also need to know that the testing has addressed all related concerns and weaknesses.

Comprehensive Evaluations

Reading

Comprehensive evaluations in reading should include measures of phonological awareness and rapid naming, word recognition, nonsense words, fluency, silent reading comprehension, and oral reading comprehension.

The evaluator often examines the child's receptive language skills, such as vocabulary, and listening comprehension. The same weaknesses in oral language will also affect language in print.

Writing

Comprehensive evaluations in writing should include measures of handwriting and/or keyboarding, spelling, the ability to formulate sentences, writing fluency, paragraph writing, and the ability to plan and organize a story or an essay.

Evaluators may also examine oral language skills. The same deficits that compromise expressive language will also affect the ability to express thoughts in writing.

Mathematics

Comprehensive evaluations in math should include an inventory of all pertinent computational skills, number formation for younger students, math related vocabulary, computational fluency, and math reasoning.

About the Author

Melissa Farrall presently works as an independent evaluator for her business, Mind Matters Inc. She also works as Adjunct Faculty in the Language and Literacy Program at Simmons College. She was one of the founders of The Reading Foundation.

Dr. Farrall helped to revise the chapters on testing in Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy, 2nd edition.

Thanks to Dr. Farrall, these chapters now include information about dozens of tests that are used to evaluate children.

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