

Will the Real Reader Please Stand Up?

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On the surface, Kevin Johnson (a pseudonym) appears to be an ideal third-grade student in a school populated with many at-risk learners. Kevin's oral reading is graceful and fluent, and he can almost always reproduce the particulars included in the text he reads. His love of sports and computer games has been painstakingly channeled by his parents into a sense of responsibility to keep his grades up and complete his work on time. Kevin seldom complains about school and looks forward to seeing his friends every day. Seeing his teacher every day is another matter altogether.

The problem is that Kevin's third-grade teacher knows something about Kevin that has escaped many other people in his life—Kevin hates to read. Kevin completes his school work on time, but he never reads at home for enjoyment. At school, he stares out the window to avoid reading for the full time during Drop Everything and Read, and he cannot identify a favorite author, series, or genre. In fact, he exhibits many of the characteristics of the classic aliterate—the individual who can read but chooses not to (Beers, 1996).

Equally troubling to Kevin's teacher is his powerful tendency toward what Johnston & Costello dubbed "brittleness" (Johnston & Costello, 2005)—his tendency to avoid learning situations that present challenges. Unlike the teachers in Kevin's earlier grades, the third-grade teacher prefers to challenge her students to think deeply about what they read and to try to unearth the messages about life that the author may have embedded in the text. Kevin struggles with thought-provoking questions, resents his teacher for asking them, and is beginning to harbor some troubling thoughts about being a failure in reading. Kevin sullenly resists his teacher's attempts

to draw him into thoughtful and challenging activities, and he longs, secretly, for the days when his teachers would ask questions he could answer, the days when he was regarded as a "good reader."

But when the administration of state accountability tests begins, it is time for Kevin to shine. Kevin lives in a state where the tests emphasize recognition of text details and knowledge of the conventions of written text (Applegate, Applegate, McGeehan, Pinto, & Kong, 2009). His word analysis ability, his knowledge of literacy-related terminology, and his ability to respond to text-based comprehension tasks make Kevin a star, and a comparison of his scores with those of his peers quickly establishes him as a proficient reader.

If we were to clone and multiply enough Kevins, we might expect concerned parents to rejoice at the increase in academic achievement at his school. We would not be surprised if the school qualified for local and national government rewards or was lionized in the press as an example of pedagogical success. But we would be hard-pressed to imagine that a literacy leader would ever regard Kevin as a success story.

Kevin's teacher agonizes over the fact that a bright and capable student finds so little enjoyment in reading. She is dismayed that Kevin's tolerance for frustration is so low because she knows what that might mean for Kevin's ability to learn in the future and how it may even affect his ability to achieve happiness and fulfillment as a human being. Kevin's teacher is a literacy leader who has a clear idea of what a good reader is and does.

Unfortunately, her thinking stands in almost direct conflict with much of the thinking of state and local governments, the media, and the public at large.

These groups have come to regard reading achievement as almost entirely determined by scores on literacy accountability tests. As literacy leaders have known for many decades, the term *reading achievement* can be elusive and misleading.

For example, is what we mean by reading achievement the attainment of technical proficiency as a reader? Do accuracy, speed, and prosody of oral reading define reading achievement? Is the ability to faithfully reproduce the message of the author the mark of a skilled reader? Or is the skilled reader one who can think deeply about the message of the author, to see the author's thinking about life and the human condition, and to weigh that message and stack it up against one's own life experiences? Or still further, are achieving readers those who can see literate activity as a mirror that reflects them and their values and that challenges them to grow as human beings?

Given those questions, can we be confident that a 60- to 90-minute snapshot of the literate activity that may fill a student's day could ever be an accurate and authentic measure whose results can have profound implications for students, parents, teachers, and the United States as a whole? These are some of the thoughts that have troubled literacy leaders for many years. Literacy leaders have long recognized that the curriculum in the literacy classroom is often dominated by the expectations embodied in the accountability tests used in their communities, cities, and states.

The International Reading Association (1999) issued guidelines and cautions for the use of high-stakes assessment in reading, but many of those cautions have gone unheeded in the wake of intense U.S. enthusiasm for accountability testing. And so it seems to us that the role of the literacy leader in today's schools demands clarity of thinking and an unwavering commitment to the learning of all students. Specifically, we believe that literacy leaders must demonstrate the following qualities:

- An acute awareness of what accountability tests can and cannot do—The truth is that test results can be used to make the kinds of comparisons that encourage thoughtful reflection and can serve as a clarion call to improvement in literacy education. Literacy leaders can and should be at the forefront of that analysis and reform.
- A willingness to spread the word to all who will listen that literacy tests provide some valuable

information but, in themselves, are incomplete—Many traits crucial to the lifelong success of our students cannot be assessed by a paper and pencil test. If we ignore this fact, we run the risk of failing to meet the educational needs of millions of student's.

- The capacity to conduct assessments that highlight students' strengths and interests rather than their deficiencies and inadequacies—Teachers who work with students like Kevin should complete interest surveys with their students to find out their reading habits, interests, and preferences, and use that information to orchestrate student-centered and responsive instruction. Literacy leaders assess students to determine areas of need, but they collect this information with an eye toward facilitating student progress and growth.
- The determination to use assessments that are culturally appropriate, especially in schools serving racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students (Edwards, Turner, & Mokhtari, 2008)—Literacy leaders collaborate with others, including reading specialists, English as a Second Language teachers, and special education teachers to determine what interventions and programs would be most beneficial for students. Literacy leaders also talk with parents about their children in ways that are open and nonjudgmental, using approaches like the parent story approach (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999) to elicit information about students' funds of knowledge and to learn more about their home literacy environments, cultural traditions, and community experiences. In the parent story approach, teachers ask parents and caregivers questions (e.g., What do you and your children like to do together?) that provide details about their home literacy practices, not just those that involve reading and writing, but those representing a wide range of literate activities (e.g., reading newspapers and magazines, paying bills, reading religious texts, surfing the internet). The parent story approach, then, is an example of a culturally-responsive assessment tool that enables teachers to gather vital information about students' interests, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences.

- A drive to make parents, administrators, and the public understand that educators do not view assessment as the enemy—Educators generally view incomplete or misunderstood assessment data as the greatest danger to educational reform.
- A willingness to explain to all concerned parties that most teachers are deeply concerned with the well-being of their students and that they tend to be insightful observers of human behavior—In the United States, we need to welcome the voices of teachers back into the assessment dialogue. Teachers can often assess crucial traits and behaviors that paper and pencil tests cannot.

There may be no better time to expand the national view of assessment within the United States than the present. The United States has entered the process of developing Common Core Standards, an initiative spearheaded by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Fifty-one states and territories have already joined the initiative, and planning has begun on the development of core academic content standards for language arts and mathematics for kindergarten through 12th-grade students. If these standards become widely accepted, it is likely that a common core assessment will soon follow.

And so the time is ripe for literacy leaders to articulate our thinking for the benefit of the many groups who are vitally interested in the education of our children. We need to encourage all concerned parties to rethink and broaden the United States' definition of literacy achievement. We must recognize that, however effective instruction may be, that instruction is lost on a student who chooses not to read. And we must demand that no matter what form literacy assessment ultimately takes, it is incomplete unless it effectively assesses the ability of all readers to respond thoughtfully and logically to what they read. The Kevin Johnsons of the world deserve nothing less.

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