

# Special Education Teachers' Identification of Students' Reading Difficulties in Grade 6

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This study investigated special educational needs (SEN) teachers' assessment practices and the accuracy of their ratings of the students' skill levels in reading fluency and reading comprehension. Results showed that SEN teachers used several assessment practices simultaneously but mostly relied on observations. Only two-thirds of low-performing students having difficulties in fluency or comprehension were identified.

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This study investigated special educational needs (SEN) teachers' (n = 29) assessment practices and the accuracy of their ratings of the students' (n = 55) skill levels in reading fluency and reading comprehension. Results showed that

SEN teachers used several assessment practices simultaneously but mostly relied on observations. The correlations between the teacher ratings and test scores were significant but moderate in fluency and weak in comprehension. Only two-thirds of low-performing students having difficulties in fluency or comprehension were identified.

- In addition to classroom teachers, special educational needs (SEN) teachers and remedial reading teachers play an essential role in evaluating students' needs for reading support, identifying literacy difficulties, and providing individualised targeted support.
- This study focuses on Finnish SEN teachers and students receiving part-time special education in the sixth grade.
- Some students' reading difficulties (RD) may not manifest themselves in the early school years but might emerge later and become persistent.
- Although identification of students' RD during primary school has been widely studied, research on teachers' assessment of RD and the accuracy of their assessments before students transition to lower secondary school (i.e. at the end of Grade 6 in the Finnish educational system) is still limited.

### **Teachers' assessment practices**

- Teachers use formative (or informal) assessments to collect data on student's current skills or to improve student's learning by implementing more personalised instruction.
- Assessment tools can be defined as high-stakes or low-stakes.
- The former is connected to the final assessment of how much the student has learned at a certain assessment point, usually in the end of an instructional segment (such as a semester).
- The latter refers to low-stakes continuous instruction

comprising assessments before and during instruction.

- Generally, teachers' assessment practices can be divided into tests, curriculum-based measures (CBMs), and qualitative assessments.
- Direct measures refer to tests.
- The accuracy of teachers' ratings of reading fluency and comprehension through observation is low in comparison to the identification of low student reading performance using CBMs and standardised achievement tests.
- CBMs can be used in general, remedial, and special education to monitor students' progress in overall school performance, for example.
- Using CBMs in conjunction with standardized procedures to track students' reading development can lead to higher identification accuracy of struggling readers as well as improvements in reading achievement.

### **Assessment of reading fluency and comprehension**

- One key factor in learning to read fluently is automatic word recognition, which develops through consistent practice, repetition, and reading a wide range of various texts.
- Reading fluency comprises decoding accuracy and automaticity, both of which are connected to reading comprehension.
- One common definition of reading fluency includes reading accuracy and rate, and reading fluency is usually operationalised as the number of correctly read items within a time limit.
- Reading comprehension requires word recognition (i.e. decoding), language comprehension, inference making, and information integration.
- Some examples of common measures to assess reading comprehension are silent reading tasks, either written or oral retell tasks, and picture matching tasks.

### **Associations between teacher ratings and test scores**

- Sensitivity of an assessment tool (i.e. its accuracy in identifying students with problems) has usually been considered important so that support can be allocated to those students who need it most.
- Specificity refers to the accuracy of an assessment tool to correctly identify students who are not at risk.
- An acceptable level of classification accuracy for sensitivity is 90% or above and for specificity 80% or above.
- Despite relatively high overall correlations between teachers' ratings and students' actual test scores, teachers may systemically over- or underestimate students' performances.
- Students with low academic performance are usually judged less accurately than typically performing students.



## **The study**

The aim of the study was to investigate SEN teachers' assessment practices and the accuracy of their ratings of reading fluency and reading comprehension in grade 6, before students' transition to lower secondary school.

Research questions:

1. What kinds of assessment practices do SEN teachers use to evaluate students' reading performances, and how do they rank different practices?
2. To what extent are SEN teachers' ratings of sixth-grade students' reading fluency and reading comprehension skills associated with students' test scores for the same skills?

3. How accurate are SEN teachers' perceptions of their students' reading fluency and reading comprehension skill levels (low performing or typically performing) compared to the students' test scores?

**Teacher sample** included 29 (90% male) SEN teachers. **Student sample** included 55 (65% male) sixth-grade students. Data collection was carried out during the spring term of grade 6.

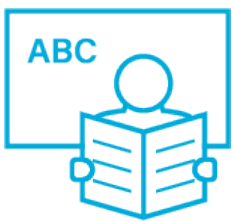


## Findings

- All teachers used several assessment practices to evaluate their students' reading skills.
- Two kinds of indirect assessment practices were ranked by the SEN teachers as the most important.
- The first was their own observations and the second was their discussions with the parents, other teachers, and the students themselves.
- Direct assessment practices (i.e. tests) were ranked as the most important by only 15% of the teachers.
- Usually, tests were word reading fluency or silent reading comprehension tests.
- Teachers considered most of the students as having no problems with fluency.
- Based on the teachers' ratings, students had more difficulties in comprehension than in fluency.
- Teachers' ratings for reading fluency were significantly correlated ( $.39, p < .01$ ) to students' performances in the two fluency tasks, and there was also a significant correlation between the teachers' ratings and the reading comprehension test scores ( $.24, p < .01$ ).
- According to logistic regression analyses, teachers'

ratings were significantly associated with students' categorical reading fluency test scores.

- Instead, according to logistic regression analyses teachers' ratings were not associated with students' categorical reading comprehension test scores.
- Sensitivity rate was rather low and below the acceptable rate for both fluency (63%) and comprehension (70%).
- Additionally, specificity rates for fluency did not quite reach an acceptable accuracy level although it was rather high (69%), and for comprehension, the quite low (20%) specificity rate revealed difficulties with identifying typically performing readers.



## Conclusions

- The most important assessment practices for SEN teachers were qualitative, such as observations and discussions.
- Achievement tests were not among the most important assessment practices, although they were widely used by the teachers, together with some other tools.
- All teachers used several assessment practices in parallel, but they mainly preferred indirect, qualitative assessment practices.
- Assessments based solely on observation are often inaccurate; instead, using various assessment practices together can improve the accuracy, especially when the standardized procedures are combined with CBMs.
- The correlation between the teachers' rating and the test scores for reading fluency was moderate, but the correlation for reading comprehension was weak.

- The moderate and weak correlations between the teachers' rating and the test scores found in this study are substantially lower, compare to those reported in many former studies.
- Teachers' judgments of both reading fluency and reading comprehension were quite inaccurate compared to the test scores.
- The findings indicate that at least 30% of the sixth-grade students struggling with RD were unidentified.
- Specificity rate of reading fluency was rather high but below the optimal rate, indicating that 30% of the typically performing students were unidentified.
- Concerning reading comprehension, most students were incorrectly identified as low achievers, even though their test scores indicated typical performance.
- Teachers need reliable assessment tools throughout primary grades to monitor students' reading progress systematically and continuously.
- Support decisions based mainly on teachers' own perceptions and observations of students' performances can lead to inaccurate assessments.
- One solution for better judgment accuracy could be a structured assessment tool designed for special education purposes enabling teachers to rank-order students' reading performances and compare the rankings with reading test scores.