



Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom! Today we're going to talk running records. What are they? Are they useful? Should you be using them? If not, what should you use instead? I'm going to call this "Rethinking Running Records" because, spoiler alert, if you have the choice, then no, you should not be doing running records anymore.

Honestly, I never thought I'd give a podcast episode about this because I was a huge fan of running records for a very long time. I used them a lot as a classroom teacher, and I trained other teachers to use running records. I had a blog post series all about why you should use running records and how to give running records. But now that I understand how reading works based on the research, and not on a theory that isn't backed by anything, I realize that running records are basically a waste of time.

Now let's talk about what they are first, because if you use them and you love them, I understand, because I was in your shoes, so I want to explain to you why I no longer believe that.

First of all, a running record is a visual representation of a child's reading. You have a piece of paper and you make little check marks for every word read correctly, and if a word is read incorrectly, that's called a miscue in running record language, and you mark what they did. Usually it would be a line with the word they said on top and the correct word on the bottom. Then after you completed the running record, you would go back and you would analyze it for those miscues. In making that error, was the child using the different cues that kids supposedly use as they read, that supposedly all of us use as we read?

There are three of them according to this theory of MSV. One is meaning, M. One is syntax and grammar, so sentence structure and so on. One is the visual cue of phonics. So MSV stands for meaning, syntax, and visual - which means phonics.

That is part of the balanced literacy three-cueing model, which is this idea that we use these three cues as we read. This was developed or proposed years ago, and it was not

backed by research, but it makes intuitive sense. It caught on quickly and teachers today, including myself until a few years ago, still hold onto this.

If you believe in three-cueing, then the running record sounds like the perfect assessment tool because what you're doing is you're analyzing the errors students make. Are they using the three cues they are supposedly supposed to use?

The problem is we now know the brain learns to read by connecting phonemes to graphemes, not by using meaning or grammar cues to solve words.

Now we might think we're teaching them to do that by using leveled, predictable books, encouraging them to think about what would make sense, thinking about if it sounds right. But really things like did that make sense, and did that sound right, should only be used if someone has made an error and they need to go back and self-correct. But the self-correction should not be made by thinking, okay, what WOULD make sense here? What WOULD sound right here? The error should be corrected by going back to the word itself and reading it using phonics.

Mark Seidenberg has written a blog post related to this and he wrote, "The best cue to a word is the word itself," and that's exactly true. If you switch from having your students "read" these leveled predictable books to reading decodable books that have the phonics skills you've taught them, you will find out how much more efficient it is to solve words. Now we can call it reading, right? We don't have to call it "solving" anymore, because they're actually reading them.

I found this out myself because I had taught my oldest five kids to read using more of a balanced literacy approach. Of course we had phonics, because balanced literacy includes phonics, but it was not systematic or sequential. Then I switched to teaching my youngest to read using a structured approach and we used decodable books and wow! It made such a difference.

I remember when I was working with some kids a few years ago, unfortunately using leveled books because I thought that's what they needed, and these were struggling first grade readers. When I tried to help them "read" a word in a predictable book, they just couldn't figure it out. It was very laborious.

This is how it sounded, "Okay, so airplanes are big ____? What's this word?" They didn't know because they couldn't sound it out. It was way past their phonics knowledge.

So then I would say, "Okay, what's the first letter of this word? M, what sound does M make? /m/. Okay, let's try this again. Airplanes are big /m/ ___. Look at the picture. What word could that be that starts with /m/?"

Do you see how long and tedious this is? The word was "machines." Then finally I just had to tell them the word because they weren't going to figure it out by context. They weren't going to figure it out by sounding it out. Syntax wasn't going to help them. I just had to tell it to them.

Really what our beginning readers need is books with words they actually can read because we've equipped them to read the words. If we're giving kids text with words containing sound spelling patterns we've taught them, they won't have to use pictures or context clues, which is a good thing because they're not supposed to.

On her website, Jocelyn Seamer says that "if your school teaches reading using a phonics program, measuring progress with this tool (that is, the running record) is a total mismatch." It just doesn't make sense. The running record is not going to give you the information you need to know, because we know that to be strong readers our beginning readers need to learn to orthographically map words. That means they need to read the words enough times that they become automatic so they don't have to sound out or guess, they just know the word.

How do they do that? How do they get good at orthographic mapping? They do it by being really good at phonemic awareness and phonic decoding. So we need assessment tools that measure those things, because those are the things we can teach that will help them move forward in their reading. Knowing a child's reading level, which is what a running record also is supposed to help you do, is not useful, because what does a child's reading level tell you anyway?

I always used to think that was the thing, that we were supposed to move kids through the levels, but a reading level is rather arbitrary. It was designed by Fountas and Pinnell, and it doesn't really tell you much. It doesn't say, well, a child at level F knows how to sound out these particular phonics patterns. It's not like that. A reading level just doesn't give you much information.

So instead let's find out information we REALLY need to know. Let's give our students a phonemic awareness assessment and a phonics assessment, and we should also, at some point, probably later first grade to begin, give them an oral reading fluency assessment to find out how many words per minute they can read. Those are things that are useful for us to know.

I really like this quote from a blog post from Spelfabet. She wrote,

"Asking a speech pathologist or teacher who understands the current reading science to administer a running record is a bit like asking a modern doctor to assess the Four Humours.

The Four Humours were the four bodily fluids of ancient and mediaeval medicine – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood – thought to influence temperament and health. They were thought to require balancing in amount and strength for good health, and surpluses or imbalances in the four humours were thought to affect not only health but also personality.

A modern doctor asked to assess the Four Humours would simply say, "that's not how the body works, so I can't do that". They'd insist on using a scientifically-based model of health, and prefer objective assessment tools developed in accordance with this model: stethoscope, thermometer, blood tests and so on, not rely on their own observations, let alone prescribe the leeches, infusions, and vomiting which made sense to doctors using Four Humours thinking.

Everyone now knows that the Four Humours aren't how the human body works, but many of today's teachers still don't know that children do not learn to read words by using meaning, structure and visual cues. The three cueing system/multicueing model of word-level reading is still the basis of running records, and these are still widely used in schools."

Okay, so forgive me for that rather graphic analogy there, but I think it makes a really good point. Once you understand that reading is not about using three cues, it's about matching phonemes to graphemes, running records become rather obsolete. We really don't need to use them anymore.

Now I'm not saying that it's not valuable to sit down and listen to a child reading and mark to yourself, taking notes about how they're reading. I think that is very useful, but not analyzing the "miscues," the way that running records do.

What we need to do instead is assess those important foundational skills. I have a phonological awareness assessment on my website, which includes phonemic

awareness. It's a rather long, lengthy assessment. You could just do parts of it, for sure. If you want something that just measures phonemic awareness, you could get the PAST from David Kilpatrick, that is free.

For a phonics assessment, I worked really hard to create a very useful phonics assessment for you that includes both real and non-words for the phonics skills, according to my phonics scope and sequence, right in that order. It even has a section at the end where you can do a spelling assessment, which is another really good way to know how much students have mastered those particular phonics patterns. I will link to all these assessments in the show notes. Also, Spelfabet has a blog post with a long list of different assessments that you could use that actually tell you useful information, and I will link to that in the show notes too.

Now, what if you are in a school where you are required to use running records, and you don't have a choice? Well, I understand that many people are in that situation, and so here are a few tips for you if you find yourself in that situation.

Number one, if you have a choice about what text to use as the child is reading, use a decodable text, use a text that includes the phonics patterns that you've taught so you can actually see if your teaching is making a difference. That would be useful.

Another thing you can do is check out researcher Nell Duke's alternative to running records. It's called The Listening to Reading-Watching While Writing Protocol, LTR-WWWP. That's quite a mouthful, but basically it's your running record on steroids, taking out the stuff we don't need, but actually giving space for writing down useful information that you could gain from listening to a child reading. Writing down a sample of the words read correctly, a sample of the words misread, an analysis of the words that were read correctly and incorrectly to show what phonics knowledge the student actually has, and so on.

It looks rather time-consuming and lengthy, but I could definitely see some value in it. While I wouldn't necessarily use this to replace the more useful assessments that I've already mentioned, it would definitely be a good tool if you are required to use running records. She has a free printable that you can print that you can use instead of the traditional running record form, or in addition, to actually to make it useful. All these things will be linked to in the show notes.

I hope this episode was helpful to you as you rethink running records and if those are really useful after all. So head to the show notes, themeasuredmom.com/episode78 to get all the resources I mentioned today. Thanks for listening. I'll talk to you next time!