

Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (1 and 2): The Research Base

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System consists of a series of carefully designed benchmark books that measure the level of difficulty at which a student is able to read fiction and nonfiction texts.¹ The books range in difficulty from those for beginning readers (A) to those for advanced readers (Z). They are accompanied by an extensive document, *The Continuum of Literacy Learning, Grades K–8: Behaviors and Understandings to Notice, Teach, and Support*, which lists text characteristics, reading behaviors, and features of comprehension along a grade-by-grade developmental continuum. Included are diagnostic assessments for the following components of reading ability:

- Comprehension within, beyond, and about the text
- Writing about reading
- Fluency
- Phonemic awareness
- Letter names
- Early literacy behaviors
- Phonics and word analysis
- High frequency word reading
- Vocabulary knowledge

Based on empirical research. The assessment is based on empirical research on language development, vocabulary expansion, reading acquisition, and reading difficulties. In particular, the F&P Benchmark Assessment System assesses the five elements of reading that are described by the National Reading Panel—phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.² In addition, it addresses issues of student motivation and interest in reading.

Engaging texts. A unique feature of the F&P Assessment System (1 and 2) is the collection of fiction and nonfiction texts that are designed to interest and engage the readers while at the same time yielding important information for the teacher. When the system was field tested, it was discovered that the children liked to read, talk about, and write about these books, and often asked to take them home.

Instruction does not work if children think that reading is “skill and drill” or drudgery. Assessment need not be a boring and tedious process. Motivation is important for both students and teachers. In fact, the National Reading Panel Report cautions that “the motivation of both students and their teachers is a critical ingredient of success.”³

A gradient of difficulty. A major goal of the assessment system is to estimate students’ reading levels in order to provide appropriate instruction. Matching books to a reader’s

¹ This assessment has been extensively field-tested with students from a large and diverse group of schools across the U.S.

² National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000a).

³ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000a).

abilities means that progress can be made along a gradient of text. Research indicates that fluent reading “develops as a result of many opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success.”⁴ With careful assessment of a student’s current reading level, the teacher knows where to begin. Each level brings new challenges in the form of vocabulary, words to decode, high frequency words, concepts, and syntax. Supportive teaching enables students to expand their reading strategies by gradually increasing the level of challenge and at the same time assuring that they are successful each day.

The gradient of text that forms the foundation of this benchmark assessment system has been created and refined as a teaching and assessment tool over the past twenty years.⁵ First published in 1996, these text levels were adopted by the New Standards Project of the National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh for the purpose of establishing national primary literacy standards⁶. The levels on the Fountas and Pinnell gradient are cited by most major publishers of leveled books for children.

The Continuum of Literacy Learning. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Systems (1 and 2) are accompanied by an extensive document that lists text characteristics, reading behaviors, and understandings to notice, teach, and support to help students think within, beyond, and about the text. *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* provides specific guidance for teaching students at each grade level and text level in a variety of instructional contexts. There are seven different continua: (1) Interactive Read Aloud; (2) Shared and Performance Reading; (3) Writing About Reading; (4) Writing; (5) Oral, Visual, and Technological Communication; (6) Phonics, Spelling and Word Study; and (7) Guided Reading (small group instruction). Once teachers assess their students, they can consult the continuum for specific direction in teaching key strategies across instructional contexts.

Determining text reading level. The process of administering the benchmark text reading level assessment is:

1. The assessor reads a standardized introduction.
2. The student reads orally while the assessor observes, codes, and analyzes reading behavior.
3. The assessor and student engage in a conversation about the book. The assessor uses a standardized set of prompts to assess comprehension level.
4. As an option, the teacher may have the student write to a prompt to provide further information about his or her comprehension and ability to express understanding of a text.
5. The assessor scores accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.
6. Based on these scores, the assessor determines the student’s *instructional*, *independent*, and *placement* level (for small group instruction).

⁴ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 27.

⁵ Fountas & Pinnell (1996).

⁶ National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh (1999).

At the *instructional* level, a student is given the opportunity to read new and more challenging texts. The teacher provides an introduction that makes the new text accessible. This introduction includes discussion about vocabulary as well as about the meaning of the text. Research indicates that “teaching specific words before reading helps both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.”⁷ Conversations about books are also very important in helping children learn new words and concepts, which they must relate to prior knowledge and experience.⁸ Moreover, the talk is centered on literary texts, giving students opportunities to use the new words and new language structures that they encounter in the books they are reading.⁹

At the *independent* level, children are able to read with only minimal teacher support. The teacher supports the readers, demonstrating and prompting for fluency and rapid word solving. This activity helps the student develop fluency and phrasing. Fluency is an essential component of reading instruction. Teachers can have students reread instructional level and independent level texts to build fluent processing. Research provides evidence that “repeated and monitored oral reading improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement.”¹⁰ Research indicates that “children need opportunities to use what they have learned in problem-solving unfamiliar words that they encounter within continuous text. They use word-solving strategies to take words apart while keeping the meaning in mind. Reading words accurately and automatically enables children to focus on the meaning of text.”¹¹

Diagnostic assessments of reading skills. The F&P Assessment System provides for the diagnostic assessment of an extensive set of reading skills.

Differentiated comprehension assessment. The comprehension score is differentiated by the *kind* of thinking the student exhibits; for example, the score for the following:

1. Thinking *within* the text involves the extent to which the student has decoded the words, searched for and used information, and reached a literal understanding of the fiction or nonfiction text.
2. Thinking *beyond* the text involves making inferences; synthesizing new information; making connections with content knowledge, background experiences, and other texts; and making predictions.
3. Thinking *about* the text involves analyzing the text for aspects of the writer’s craft or critiquing the quality or objectivity of the text.

The teacher can look at these scores for an individual student over time or profile the whole class and small groups to see where the instructional emphasis should be. Then, using *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* for several different areas (for example, Guided Reading, Interactive Read Aloud, Writing About Reading), teachers can provide

⁷ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 36.

⁸ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, (2001), p. 35.

⁹ Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998).

¹⁰ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 22.

¹¹ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 18.

specific and systematic instruction on comprehension. Research supports instruction in specific comprehension strategies as a means to helping children gain the meaning of texts.¹²

Writing About Reading Assessment. For each benchmark text, a standardized Writing About Reading prompt is provided. The student may complete this assignment alone. The writing prompts are designed to be similar to those that students will encounter on standardized tests. The results of this assessment give the teacher evidence of a student's ability to express key understandings and analytic thinking in writing. Then, using *The Continuum of Literacy Learning for Writing About Reading*, teachers can provide specific and systematic instruction on how to use writing to express and extend thinking about reading. When readers have had ample time to process instructional text, comprehension strategies are reinforced through writing, which often involves simple charts or graphic organizers to help readers focus on concepts and their relationships.¹³

In-depth Fluency Assessment. In addition to the basic evaluation of fluency included in the text reading assessment, the F&P System includes a six-dimension fluency assessment that will help teachers be more specific in their teaching of phrasing, pausing, appropriate word stress, intonation, reading rate, and integration. Integration involves the way the reader consistently and evenly orchestrates pausing, phrasing, stress, intonation, and rate. The reader moves smoothly from one word to another, from one phrase to another, and from one sentence to another, incorporating pauses that are just long enough to perform their function.¹⁴

Fluency is given close attention in the F&P systems because fluency is critical for reading comprehension: "Fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. Fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension" but "is often neglected in the classroom."¹⁵

At benchmark reading levels A and B, children are just gaining control of voice-to-print matching, so fluency is not assessed. In all levels beyond B, fluency is assessed either with the standard four-point scale or with the six-dimension scale because "fluency is not a stage of development at which readers can read all words quickly and easily. Fluency changes depending on what readers are reading, their familiarity with the words, and the amount of their practice with reading text."¹⁶

Both scales are based on a scale developed for and published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).¹⁷ This study found a strong relationship between

¹² Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 49.

¹³ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 50–51.

¹⁴ Pinnell & Fountas (2007).

¹⁵ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000a), p. 11.

¹⁶ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 23.

¹⁷ "A recent large-scale study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 44% of a representative sample of the nation's fourth graders were low in fluency. The study also found a close relationship between fluency and reading comprehension. Students who score lower on measures of fluency also scored lower on measures of comprehension, suggesting that fluency is a neglected reading

reading fluency and reading comprehension, agreeing with the National Reading Panel that “if text is read in a laborious and inefficient manner, it will be difficult for the child to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge.”¹⁸

Phonemic Awareness Assessments. The F&P System 1 (grades K–2) provides four assessments of phonemic awareness: Initial Sounds, Blending Words, Segmenting Words, and Rhyming. Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read. Research supports phonemic awareness instruction as an essential foundation for learning to read and has been found to be very effective in preventing reading difficulties.¹⁹ Kindergarten and first grade teachers will want to use these assessment results to inform phonemic awareness instruction, which involves manipulating sounds in speech and working with rhymes, words, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Initially this is done without letters, but after children have learned the task of hearing, identifying, segmenting, and blending phonemes in words, they can work with sounds and letters together.

Letter Name Assessment. A Letter Recognition Assessment is provided in F&P System 1 (grades K–2). Teachers will want to administer this part of the assessment to test the child’s knowledge of the relationships between letters and sounds. Research provides evidence that “using letters to manipulate phonemes helps children make the transfer to reading and writing.”²⁰ In addition, “teaching sounds along with the letters of the alphabet is important because it helps children to see how phonemic awareness relates to their reading and writing.”²¹

Early Literacy Behaviors Assessment. An Early Literacy Behaviors Assessment is provided in F&P System 1 (grades K–2). This assessment (linked to *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*) provides information about ways to teach young children how to look at print. Critical early concepts help them understand how to look at letters, how letters are put together to make words, and how print is arranged from left to right. These basic understandings are important as foundations for using letter-sound relationships.²² The students are taught to distinguish letters by their features, to read left to right with word-by-word matching, and to return to the left after reaching the end of the line. Using easy early books, using magnetic letters to make words, and writing are important activities at this stage of reading development.

Phonics and Word Analysis Assessments. Including the phonemic awareness, high frequency word, and letter name tests, the F&P System 1 (grades K–2) includes 22 Phonics and Word Analysis Assessments; System 2 (grades 3–8) includes 18. These

skill in many American classrooms, affecting many students’ reading comprehension.” (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001). p. 23, citing Pinnell, G.S., Pikulski, J.J., Wixson, K.K., Campbell, J.R., Gough, R.B., & Beatty, A.S. (1995).

¹⁸ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000a), p. 11.

¹⁹ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000b), p. 2–11

²⁰ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000b), p. 2–33.

²¹ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 6.

²² Clay (2001).

assessments focus on key areas such as a wide variety of letter-sound relationships (vowels, consonants, letter clusters, phonograms), word patterns, and elements of word structure. Also included is an innovative Word Features Test for each grade level, which provides a measure of the kinds of words children are able to decode (for example, short and long vowel sounds, phonogram patterns, prefixes and suffixes, multisyllabic words). Some assessments are individual and some can be used with groups of students. These assessments have been successfully used since 2002 as part of the Phonics and Word Study Lessons and are based on the phonological and orthographic systems of the English language.²³ Research supports systematic phonics instruction as more effective than nonsystematic instruction or no instruction.²⁴ The information from these assessments will help teachers target phonics and spelling instruction by using the Phonics and Word Study continuum. Concepts are organized along a continuum of difficulty, with one principle building on another. Daily phonics lessons may be planned to provide systematic steps in learning letter-sound relationships (consonants, vowels, digraphs, and blends) as well as spelling patterns (phonograms). Within each thirty-minute lesson, ten minutes is allocated to phonemic awareness/discrimination and phonics.

High Frequency Word Assessments. In F&P Benchmark Assessment System 1 (grades K–2), four High Frequency Word Assessments are provided to account for the 200 words appearing most frequently in print. In System 2, two High Frequency Word Assessments are provided to account for the 300 words appearing most frequently in print. Word lists were constructed from established word lists and tested over several years as part of the Phonics and Word Study Lessons.²⁵

Children must learn to take words apart to decode them, but it is also important for them to develop a core of words that they know automatically and rapidly. Often, after a word is decoded several times, it becomes a known word. But other words (such as *the*) are remembered more for their visual features. The information from these assessments can help teachers plan effective teaching of high frequency words. Rapid word recognition frees attention for thinking about the meaning of the text.²⁶

Vocabulary Assessments. System 1 (grades K–2) includes 39 Vocabulary Assessments. The first 11 focus on concept words, synonyms, antonyms, and homophones. The next 27 provide an innovative Vocabulary in Context test for each level (A to L)—fiction and nonfiction. This assessment provides information about the reader’s ability to derive the meaning of words from contextual information. System 2 (grades 3–8) includes 40 Vocabulary Assessments, adding homographs, Greek and Latin word roots, and analogies, as well as two Vocabulary in Context tests for every text level L to Z.

Information from the Vocabulary Assessments, using *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*, can guide instruction in several areas, including interactive read aloud, phonics

²³ Pinnell & Fountas, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004.

²⁴ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 13.

²⁵ Pinnell & Fountas, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004.

²⁶ Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn (2001), p. 18.

and word study, and guided reading. Through conversations with “expert others,” children expand their ability to use language and solve problems.²⁷ This process is especially important for children who are struggling with the reading process, including English language learners.

In summary, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System provides valuable information on reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension as well as data to support a broad range of reading, writing, phonics, and vocabulary instruction. It can be used to monitor the progress of individual students over time; it can also be used to assess program outcomes. Through participating in the assessment, students can learn to be more articulate about the understandings that they have gained from reading. You can also gather documentation on their ability to respond to texts in writing. In addition, students who participate in this assessment will be thinking, talking, and writing about what they read—all activities that have instructional value as well as yielding important assessment data.

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