What Do I Teach Tomorrow? Using Literacy Data to Make Informed Teaching Decisions

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Abstract

Running records are not regularly utilized to their full potential by classroom teachers. Often, teachers use running records only to determine an instructional text level for an individual student and then to place students into reading groups for instructional purposes based on student reading levels. When more thoroughly analyzed, running records can aid teachers in making informed instructional decisions based on student needs. Instruction becomes more beneficial with a focus on the development of strategic processing of individual students.

Keywords: *emerging literacy learners, running records, teaching decisions*

Running records are an important part of assessment. In order for running records to be of use in classroom instruction, the classroom teacher must be able to analyze and interpret information from running records to make informed teaching decisions. This chapter will provide teachers with a way to use running records to determine strategic behaviors supportive of emerging literacy learners as they progress in literacy acquisition. The presented information about running records will extend beyond obtaining an accuracy level and analyzing sources of information children use. The purpose of this chapter is to examine evidence of student reading behaviors and to aid teachers in using these behaviors to make informed instructional decisions.

Running Records

Purpose of a Running Record

A running record is a tool for recording and identifying patterns based on what a child says and does as he is reading a text. As the child reads, the teacher captures all they do as they read. A record includes not only data about accurate reading, but also student attempts at unknown words, re-readings in order to either confirm or correct previous attempts, and appeals made to the teacher by the child for additional help when they are unable to help themselves. Marie Clay, the developer of

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running records, states that, "If running records are taken in a systematic way they provide evidence of how well children are learning to direct their knowledge of letters, sounds and words to understanding the messages in the text" (Clay, 2005, p. 51). Running records provide insight into children's literacy development.

Running records can provide three important assessment opportunities for the classroom teacher. First, running records can be used to guide teaching decisions. The running record captures what the reader says and does while reading continuous text. It allows the teacher to immediately review what happened during the reading and enables the teacher to implement strategic instruction after the reading occurs or as plans are made for the next day's lesson. The teacher can judge what the student already knows, what they are attending to, and what the child has overlooked. For example, a running record may demonstrate a pattern of student substitutions that make sense within the context of the written material but show that the child neglects information regarding letters and sounds. An example of this is when the student substitutes the word "bunny" for "rabbit" in the sentence, "I see a rabbit." Following this type of error, the teacher would emphasize looking at the letters and may ask the child, "What would make sense but look like this word?" In another example, a student might substitute a word in a sentence that looks similar to the word in the text but does not maintain the meaning of the written text. An example of this is when a child substitutes the word "barn" for "baby" in the sentence, "The baby is crawling." In this instance, the teacher's emphasis would be on helping the child understand that reading must make sense. It is the teacher's job to help the child understand that when reading, if something does not make sense, the child has more work that needs to be done. This ability to analyze the sources of information that the child is both using and neglecting allows the teacher to prompt, support, and challenge the individual learner.

Additionally the running record enables the teacher to assess the difficulty of the text that the child is reading. The teacher uses this information to make sure the students are working on material that is neither too difficult nor too easy. The student is being asked to problem-solve on that "just right" text which allows them to problem solve within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Another purpose of the running record is to capture the progress the student makes on their reading ability over a period of time. Not only can the teacher plot the student's progress over time as they read text of increasing levels of difficulty and complexity, but the analysis of reading behaviors also allows the teacher to note changes in the way that the student problem solves at a point of difficulty. For example, the teacher can show parents how the child has moved from reading at a level three text on a reading assessment such as Heinemann's *Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)* at the beginning of their first-grade year of school to a level six by the end of the first grading period. Additionally, the teacher can cite evidence from the running record to show that whereas at the beginning of the school year, the student's only problem-solving strategy at a point of difficulty was to appeal to the teacher, by the end of the first grading period the student's running record showed evidence that the student was learning to incorporate additional reading behaviors to help in their problem-solving process. Such reading behaviors might include rereading to aid in the search for additional information or substituting a word that made sense and then cross-checking that meaningful substitution with the visual information of the print to see if what they had spoken looked like the printed word in the text.

Analysis of Running Records

A part-to-whole approach to teaching reading assumes that when a child reads, they are recalling known words and attacking unknown words. Some prominent reading researchers (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1994; Samuels,

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1994) assert that learning to read reflects a linear process, beginning first with the development of phonemic awareness, learning letters and sounds, blending those sounds into words, and finally using words as they read longer text. In contrast to this linear view of learning to read, other researchers favor a multi-faceted and complex view of reading (Clay, 2016: Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), where the emerging literacy learner is using information of various kinds to make a choice among possible responses. The child is trying to get the best fit with the limited knowledge they have. The multitude of information that the reader must attend to during the reading process is described in depth by Jones (1997).

> At any moment, a reader of any level of proficiency must keep in mind story meaning, sentence meaning, sentence syntax, and some metacognitive awareness of fit, while simultaneously perceiving and identifying words, word-parts, and punctuation marks . . . for the reader they [these processes] operate so automatically that they continue without conscious control and often appear effortless (p. 175).

It is this comprehensive approach to teaching reading that will guide the discussion in this section.

When examining a running record, it is important to analyze each individual error and not pick and choose among the errors, deciding to analyze some and neglect others. To analyze only selected errors might allow the teacher's preconceived notions of what is happening with a particular child to overshadow that which the teacher does not realize is happening. For every error, teachers must wonder, "What lead the child to do (or say) that? As part of this wondering process, the teachers must ask themselves at least three questions:

1. Did the meaning or the messages of the text influence the error? If the child's substituted word for a printed word is meaningful in the text, we say that the child was searching with meaning.
2. Did the structure (syntax) of the sentence up to the error influence the response? If the child's substituted word followed the structure or syntax of the English language, then we can argue that the child is searching with structure or syntax.
3. Did visual information from the print influence any part of the error? If any part of the child's substituted word is visually similar to the word printed in the text, we say that the child was searching with visual information.

The accuracy rate at which a child reads can be determined with a simple mathematical formula. Take the total number of words that the child read, subtract the number of errors, and then divide that difference by the total number of words read. The result is the percentage of words read accurately. Let's do a simple example. Assume that a child reads a story that is 100 words in length and makes five errors. Using the above formula results in the following calculation: 100 (the total words read) minus 5 (the number of errors) equals 95. Dividing 95 by 100 (the total number of words read) equals 0.95 or 95%.

Fountas and Pinnell (2017) stated that when a child is reading from 95%-100%, the text is considered to be easy. The instructional range for reading instruction is recognized as being in the range of 90%-94% accuracy. Anything read at an accuracy rate of 89% or below is considered to be hard for the child and is probably causing the child to become frustrated as they read

Knowing the number of words read by the child, as well as the number of errors and self-corrections made by the child, also allows teachers to make some other useful calculations. The child's error rate is calculated by dividing the total number of words read by the number of

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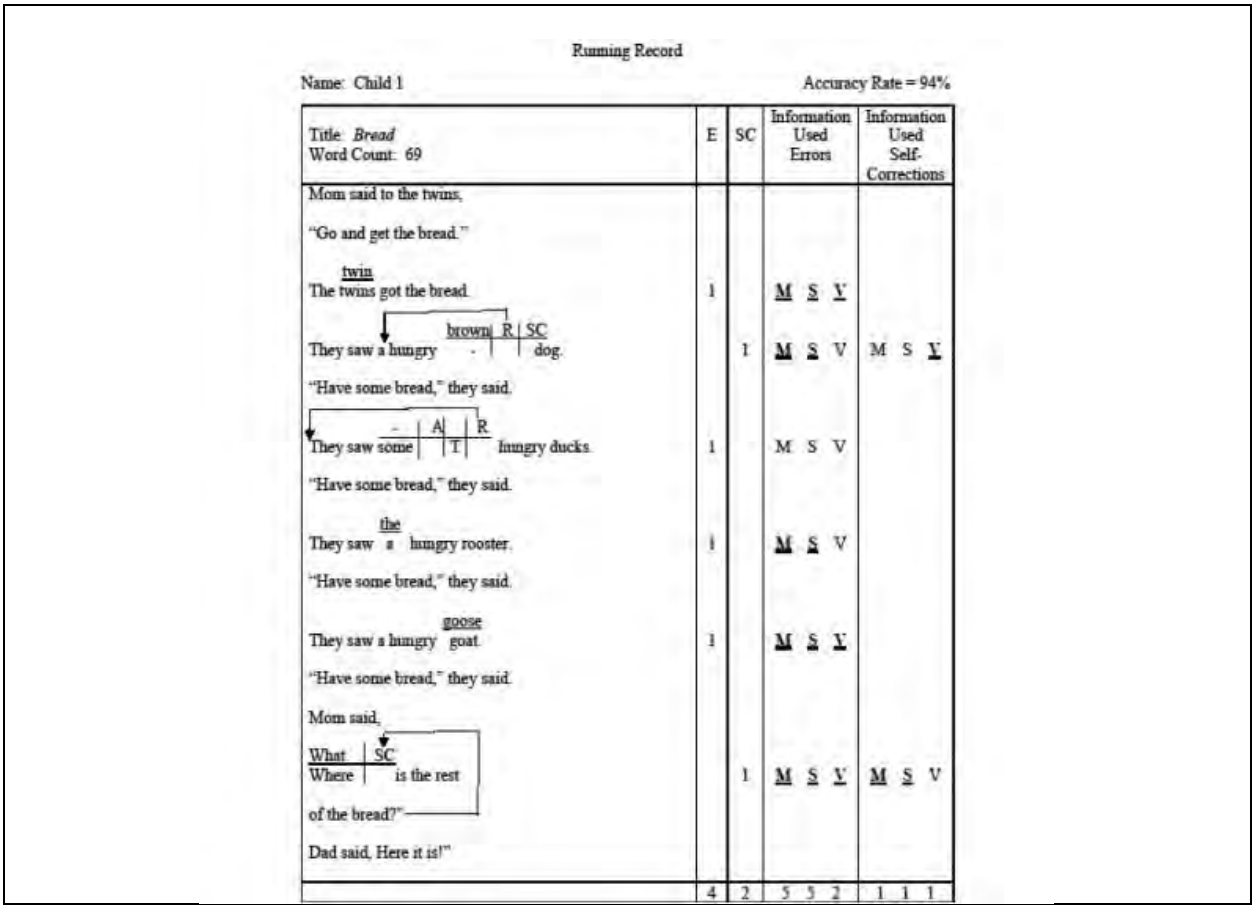
errors made. Using the above example, this same child's error rate is calculated by dividing 100 (the number of words read) by 5 (the number of errors made), giving us an answer of 20. The answer is stated as a ratio with the first number of the ratio always being a 1. In this example, the error ratio is 1:20. This means that for every 20 words the child read, he made one error.

Another helpful calculation for teachers to know is the self-correction rate. The self-correction rate is calculated by adding the number of errors made by the child to the number of self-corrections that the child made. Consider the above example again, but with one additional piece of information. Suppose the child read a text that consisted of 100 words, made 5 errors, and in addition to those uncorrected errors, also self-corrected himself 3 times. If we add 5 (the number of uncorrected errors) to 3 (the number of self-corrected errors), we get 8. We then divide this total by 3 (the number of self-corrections), resulting in an answer of 1.6. For the sake of simplicity, we will round this number up to 2. Like the error rate, the self-correction rate is always stated as a ratio with the first number being a 1. This gives us a ratio of 1:2. This means that for every 2 errors the child made, they self-corrected once.

The following running records of Child 1 and Child 2 illustrate how and why this information is important. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the running record and analysis of each child as they read identical text. The text read is Joy Cowley's *Bread* (n.d.).



Running Record

Name: Child 1 Accuracy Rate = 94%

Title: *Bread* Word Count: 69	E	SC	Information Used Errors	Information Used Self-Corrections
Mom said to the twins, "Go and get the bread."				
twin The twins got the bread.	1		M S V	
brown R SC They saw a hungry - dog.		1	M S V	M S V
"Have some bread," they said.				
- A R They saw some T hungry ducks.	1		M S V	
"Have some bread," they said.				
the They saw a hungry rooster.	1		M S V	
"Have some bread," they said.				
goose They saw a hungry goat.	1		M S V	
"Have some bread," they said.				
Mom said, What SC Where is the rest of the bread?"		1	M S V	M S V
Dad said, Here it is!"				
	4	2	5 5 2	1 1 1

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Figure 1. Child one running record data

Running Record

Name: Child 2 Accuracy = 94%

Title: *Bread* Word Count: 69	E	SC	Information Used Errors	Information Used Self-Corrections
Mom said to the twins, (kids | SC)		1	**M** **S** V	M S **V**
"Go and get the bread."				
The twins got the bread.				
They saw a hungry | T dog.	1		M S V	
"Have some bread," they said.				
They saw some hungry ducks.	1		M S V	
"Have some bread," they said.				
They saw a hungry rooster.	1		M S V	
"Have some bread," (rolls | SC) they said.		1	**M** **S** V	M S **V**
They saw a hungry goat.				
"Have some bread," they said.				
Mom said,				
"Where | T is the rest	1		M S V	
of the bread?"				
Dad said, "Here it is!"				
	4	2	2 2 0	0 0 2

Figure 2. Child two running record data

For the purpose of discussion, we will divide the analysis of running records into three levels. The first level of analysis is to look at the accuracy rate, the error rate, and the self-correction rate of the child's reading. This level of analysis is entirely about the mathematical calculations described previously. It does not look at the quality of the errors or the reading behaviors of the student. This is a baseline level of information, and is often used by the classroom teacher to group students into ability level reading groups. When examining the first level of analysis for Child 1 and Child 2 (see Table 1), both students appear to be identical in reading ability and should, therefore, be grouped together because their instructional needs are identical.

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Table 1

First Level of Analysis

	Child 1	**Child 2**
Words Read	69	69
Errors	4	4
Self-Corrections	2	2
Accuracy Rate	94%	94%
Self-Correction Rate	1:3	1:3

The second level of analysis looks at sources of information (meaning, syntax, and visual) searched by the student (see Table 2). Although there is generally a greater use of these sources of information by Child 1, the profiles for each student remain similar. Both children tend to search meaning and syntactical information when their errors occur. They also both tend to neglect visual information contained in the text. If this is where the teacher's analysis ends, the two children are again characterized in a similar way and the instruction needed for both children is assumed to be similar. It is not until we get into the third level of analysis that the differences in the reading behaviors of the two students become clear. Here, the analysis becomes important in differentiating between the reading behaviors and consequent instruction needed for the two students.

Table 2

Second Level of Analysis

	Errors			**Self-Corrections**		
	M	**S**	**V**	**M**	**S**	**V**
Child 1	5	5	2	1	1	1
Child 2	2	2	0	0	0	2

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In the third level of analysis, it becomes obvious that the two students, who looked very similar in levels one and two of the analysis, are exhibiting quite different reading behaviors. Consequently, the two children need instruction specific to their individual needs. These children need to be treated differently when we think in terms of learning needs and how the classroom teacher will structure their instruction. These two children are driving two different processing systems as they exhibit their different reading behaviors (see Table 3).

Table 3

Third Level of Analysis

Child 1	**Child 2**
Rereads at the point of error	Doesn't reread at point of error
Rereads after being told a word	Doesn't reread after being told a word
Nearly always predicts when unsure	Doesn't often predict when unsure
Seeks help when necessary	Doesn't seek help when necessary

Child 1 exhibits reading behaviors that describe an active strategic processing system as they read text. When a point of difficulty in the text is encountered, this student deliberately applies problem-solving skills to help decode and bring meaning to the unknown text. This child rereads at the point of difficulty in order to search for additional information within the printed text and the meaning of the story. Child1 also repeats a word after they are told that word by the teacher. This behavior helps the student maintain the meaning of the text in their mind as the reading occurs. Also, Child 1 nearly always makes a prediction of an unknown word when they are unsure of a written word. The substituted words always make sense and preserve the storyline. In addition to maintaining the meaning of the story, the substitutions are nearly always visually similar to the unknown word. This shows that the child is cross-checking one source of information (meaning) with another source of information (visual) within the context of the story. Lastly, Child 1 understands that, at times, it is necessary to ask for the help of the teacher. However, asking to be told an unknown word is not the most common "go to" behavior for this student. This student understands that reading is a problem-solving process and that the person primarily responsible for performing that problem-solving activity is the student.

An analysis of the reading of Child 1 reveals that this child experiences difficulty with final visual information. Substitutions made by the child begin with the same initial letter, but the visual information at the end of the word in the text does not look like the word substituted by the child. Instruction needed for Child 1

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involves helping the child check on the final visual information of printed words.

While Child 2 is beginning to implement some of the problem-solving activities exhibited by Child 1, Child 2 is not as independent at initiating solutions to problems arising when reading unknown text. Child 2 did, on two occasions, monitor and self-correct their reading based on the first letter of an unknown word. However, what is glaringly evident in the running record of Child 2 is that this child does not generally incorporate problem-solving activities at points of difficulty. At no time does Child 2 reread to search for any additional information in the text. It is, in fact, rare for Child 2 to make a prediction based on the meaning of the story at a point of difficulty. This child's primary method of problem solving unknown text is to stop at the point of difficulty and wait for the teacher to tell them the unknown word. It is important to note that when this child encounters an unknown word, no visible effort is put forth. Things not happening include sounding the first letter to help them think of what would make sense in the storyline or repeating the word after being told the word by the teacher. This child's approach to unknown text is one of passivity, merely waiting for the teacher to tell them the word.

The next step for Child 2's instruction needs to be helping them to become more active in their problem-solving activity. Child 2 must learn that primary responsibility for initiating problem solving activity belongs to them. The teacher can facilitate the child in this knowledge by helping them to understand that it is the child's responsibility to do something at the point of difficulty. The child can make a prediction at the point of difficulty that makes sense within the text and eventually learn to check that prediction with the visual information of the printed word. Another possibility is for the child to sound the first letter of the unknown word and then think of a word that makes sense within the text and begins with that sound, eventually learning to check the remainder of the unknown word visually to confirm their response. As time passes, the child will learn to check larger parts of the unknown word (onset/rime, syllables, etc.) to help in their problem solving.

It is important to note that, in spite of identical scores at the level 1 analysis, identical instruction for the two students would not be beneficial. Trying to have Child 2 focus on word endings at this point in their reading progress would be ineffective. Child 2 cannot focus on checking word endings because they are not yet making predictions that can be checked. This focus of instruction would be meaningless to Child 2. Focusing on initiating reading activity at a point of difficulty would not benefit Child 1. This student is already doing this extremely well. This point of instruction would not lift this child's level of reading activity to help them to become a more proficient reader.

Teachers of emergent literacy learners use their observations of children's reading behaviors to make decisions that affect the learning of each individual student. The ongoing process of teaching and learning leads to shifts in both the ways teachers teach and in what the students are learning as time progresses. Estice (1998) describes the cycle of the teacher and learner as they both go through the process of the teacher observing the individual student to make decisions regarding what needs to come next in the student's reading instruction. As the teacher observes the student, the teacher records reading behaviors of the student. This recording is accomplished both through the use of running records and anecdotal notes of observations made. The teacher then uses those notes to make informed and prioritized teaching decisions regarding the student's next steps for instruction. As the teaching occurs, the student responds to the instruction and incorporates new understandings about how print works into their reading behaviors. The student may, at first, be inconsistent in the application of the new

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learning. However, given more opportunities for further instruction and practice, new problem-solving behavior appears and the child becomes independent in the use of a particular reading behavior. The process then begins again as the teacher again observes, records, and prioritizes further instruction and the child then practices and becomes independent on the additional learning. While the above description is simplistic in nature, it does describe the cyclic nature of reading instruction. The ongoing process that leads to shifts in both teaching and learning over time might be viewed as the teacher observes, records, and teaches the child. As this is happening, the child is learning new things and independently problem-solving.

All emerging literacy learners exhibit both strengths and weaknesses as they progress in their learning. Running records provide evidence of the reader's strong points as well as what is yet to be learned through instruction. The challenge for the classroom teacher is two-fold. First, the teacher must learn to recognize and articulate both what students do well and what they have yet to learn. Secondly, the teacher must use this information to decide on what needs to be the next step in the child's learning. To emphasize this point, we will use the running records of two students we call Daniel and Lauren. First, we will consider Daniel as he reads *Speedy Bee* (see Figures 4 and 5).

Speedy Bee

Page 3	Speedy Bee said,
	"The baby bees are hungry."
5	"I will go and look for flowers,"
	said Speedy Bee.
7	Speedy bee looked for flowers
	up in the trees.
	"No flowers here," she said,
	and she went on.
9	Speedy Bee looked for flowers
	down in the grass.
	"No flowers here," she said,
	and she went on.
10	Speedy Bee went on . . .
11	and on . . . and on.
12	Speedy Bee came
	to a big garden.
14	Speedy Bee went
	into the flowers
	to look for food.
16	Speedy Bee went home
	with food for the baby bees.

Figure 4. Text of *Speedy Bee* (Giles, 2000)

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Running Record

Name: Daniel Accuracy = 92%

Page	*Speedy Bee* Word Count: 106
3	✓✓ says / said | T
	✓✓✓✓ h- / hungry | T
5	✓✓✓✓✓✓ f- / flowers | T
	✓✓✓
	✓✓✓✓✓✓
	✓✓✓ forest | SC / flowers
7	✓✓✓✓✓
	- | SC / up ✓✓✓
	✓✓✓✓✓
	✓✓✓✓
9	✓✓✓✓ food | SC / flowers
	✓✓✓ g- / grass | T
	✓✓✓✓✓
	✓✓ was | A | w- / went | Y | T ✓
10	✓✓✓✓
11	✓✓✓✓
12	✓✓✓
	✓✓✓ g- | A | g- / garden | T
	✓✓✓✓✓
	✓✓
14	✓✓✓
	✓✓ - | A | - / flowers | T
	✓✓✓✓
16	✓✓✓✓
	✓ f- / food | T ✓✓✓✓

Figure 5. Daniel's running record

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An analysis of Daniel's reading reveals that Daniel can sometimes integrate all sources of information (meaning, syntax, and visual) as he reads. This is evidenced on page three as he read "says" for "said" and again on page five as he read "forest" for "flowers." The substituted word in both examples made sense in the text at the point which they were substituted. In addition, both substitutions were visually similar to the word printed in the text. At times, Daniel searched for further visual information to self-correct after using some visual information in his first attempt. This is exemplified on page five when he read "forest" for "flowers" and immediately corrected his reading. He also did this on page nine when he read "food" for "flowers," once again self-correcting immediately at the point of the error. Daniel monitors his reading and ensures that his reading of the text makes sense. Also, at the point of difficulty, Daniel often sounds the first letter of the unknown word in an attempt at reading the unknown word.

While sounding the first letter of the unknown word can be a strength, it also provides information to the teacher regarding the next step needed for his instruction. Close analysis of Daniel's reading reveals that his sounding of the first letter of the unknown word does not lead to his successful problem solving of unknown words. Based on his running record, Daniel appears to be thinking, "I'll just try the first letter and then the teacher will help me." Therefore, Daniel needs instruction on self-initiating a search beyond the initial letter of unknown words. Instruction can support Daniel by guiding him to notice larger, more meaningful sections of the unknown word (onset/rime, syllables, etc.). The teacher's job becomes one of explicitly demonstrating how to look for and use these larger chunks of unknown words and then scaffolding that instruction until Daniel is capable of doing so independently. The teacher might say, "Every time you get stuck, don't just sit and wait. Go back to the beginning, reread and think about the story. When you get to the tricky part, look for a bigger part of the word that might help you." Rereading helps the student regain the meaning of the text. Therefore, this prompt encourages Daniel to integrate multiple sources of information into his problem solving rather than just relying on attending to the first letter in the word.

Our final running record example is that of Lauren as she reads Mishica's *Papa Penguin's Surprise* (see Figures 6 and 7). Lauren exhibits many strengths as a reader. These include rereading the text at points of difficulty. She rereads both to search for additional information in order to initiate a self-correction and to confirm what she has read. Additionally, she rereads after she has been told a word by her teacher. This helps her to confirm what she has been told as well as to re-establish the meaning of the text. Lauren is beginning to make multiple different attempts at a point of difficulty. This is an extremely important action for a young reader. Lauren understands that if her first attempt is not correct, she needs to try something different in her effort to achieve accurate reading.

Lauren needs to learn to monitor errors where a visual discrepancy occurs with either the medial or final letters of the word. After the reading, the teacher might return to a page where Lauren neglected medial or final letters and state, "You said, . . . (repeating what she said). Are you right?" Such a question would cause Lauren to look more closely at the text in an effort to check her response. Another teacher response might be, "Something on this page was not quite right, can you find it?" Again, this guides the child to check more closely on their reading. Additionally, the teacher could return to page two where the child attempted "red" and "rolly" for "round." Praise needs to be given for the child's multiple different attempts. This is true even if the child's attempts do not result in

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correct reading. This praise reinforces to the child that they are doing something right and encourages them to continue the desired behavior. The teacher can then guide the child

Papa Penguin's Surprise

Page 2	One day in May, Mama Penguin gave Papa Penguin something round.
3	"Please take care of this," she said. "I'll be back."
4	Papa Penguin put the round thing on top of his feet. He put his fat belly over it.
5	He sat and sat for thirty days. He waited for Mama Penguin to come back.
6	The wind blew. It snowed. But Papa Penguin sat and sat for thirty more days.
7	He waited with all the other papa penguins.
8	Mama Penguin had gone to sea. She ate a lot of fish. Then she leaped out of the water onto the ice and started back.
9	Then one morning, the egg started to shake.
10	Crack! A baby penguin popped out.
11	When Mama Penguin came back, she said, "You are a good father."
12	Then they both took care of Baby Penguin.

Figure 6. Text of *Papa Penguin's Surprise* (Mishica,2000)

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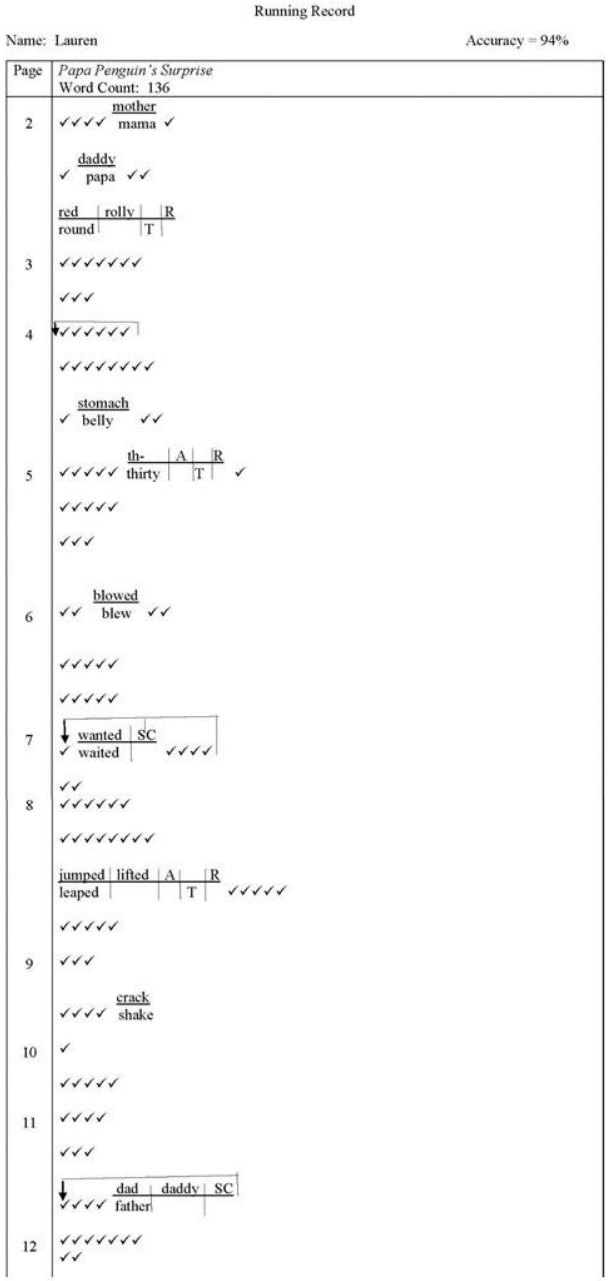

Figure 7. Lauren's running record

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in problem-solving on the unknown word. It is the child's higher level of processing that we want to reinforce, not just the act of accurate reading. That higher level of processing will lead to more of the same type of problem solving on other words on other days and in different books.

In conclusion, running records are a valuable tool for classroom teachers to use in making informed teaching decisions regarding the next step for students' instruction. In order to make the best use of this tool, however, the teacher cannot stop the analysis after completing the mathematical formulas to determine if a text is at a student's instructional level. The classroom teacher must continue to the second and third level of analysis, looking at the child's specific reading behavior so that the next step needed in the child's reading instruction can be determined. This allows the teacher to determine the best instruction for the individual needs of students.

Teachers who are not used to analyzing running records taken in the classroom this deeply may initially feel overwhelmed with the task. However, by initially selecting a small number of students to target (perhaps initially targeting one or two students who are struggling), the task will become easier and more automatic over time. With hard work and experience, it is amazing how quickly teachers can select teaching points which reflect the students' processing problems. When analyzing running records, think about the pattern of responding, where in the text you might go to reinforce your teaching point, and what prompts you might use with the student to lift their processing system. This way rationales can be developed and, consequently, future teaching points will become easier and more focused the student's processing process.

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