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INTRODUCTION

“Our history is thin when it comes to standard setting and assessment. We know how to design basic skills testing; how to use test data to rank, rather than improve, schools and to sort, rather than educate, children. We have rarely developed productive, rather than reductive or punitive, assessment and accountability systems—despite the fact that our students are among the most tested in the world.”

—Wolf, LeMahieu, and Eresh, 1992, p. 9

For many years the area of assessment has been relegated to a secondary role in the educational process. Many educators feel it has been ignored, misused, and totally misunderstood by administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In the last decade, assessment has emerged as one of the major components in the restructured school. One cannot open an educational journal, attend a workshop, or watch the news without reading and hearing about standards-based reform and performance assessment.

The emergence of authentic assessment coincides with an increase in the significance of standardized testing. Almost everyone is aware of the controversy surrounding standardized tests. Charges that standardized tests do not always measure significant learner achievement, do not measure growth and development, and do not accurately reflect what students can and cannot do have been made over and over again. Yet, despite the research and the criticism of standardized tests, policymakers, parents, and the general public base much of their perception of the educational system on the publication of standardized test scores and the comparisons of the scores in schools, districts, and states.



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Standardized and Teacher-Made Tests

Standardized Tests

Despite criticisms that standardized tests do not always assess what students are learning and that they emphasize factual knowledge rather than performance or application, they are still the yardstick that the public and policymakers use to measure educational progress. Standardized tests are viewed by many people as being valid and reliable and, for the most part, the most effective method to compare students, schools, districts, states, and countries.



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Most people agree that standardized test scores are used to determine many important educational decisions. Some states are using high stakes standardized tests to track students, to award diplomas, to reward classroom teachers with bonuses, if their students perform well, and to fire teachers and school administrators whose students perform poorly.

Teacher-Made Tests

Even though the press and the public focus on standardized test scores, most educators know that with the exception of placement decisions, bonuses, and probations doled out by some legislatures, teacher-made tests play a much bigger role in the day-to-day assessment process. Students receive grades from teachers. Unfortunately, many teachers do not have adequate training in preparing, evaluating, and using teacher-made tests effectively or in assessing student achievement and achievement of students.

Brandt (1992b) states that "Educators who have long protested the misuse of standardized tests must concede that most of the tests students take are devised by teachers, and that some of those are even worse than the published ones" (p. 7).

Assessment Training for Teachers

Hills (1991) blames the classroom assessment problem on the lack of training teachers receive. Only a few states require prospective teachers to take a course on evaluation. Most colleges of education offer courses in evaluation, but not many students take them. Hills also laments the fact that few students in the evaluation courses he has taught are able to construct test items that are clear, high-level, and related to course outcomes.

“Our current assessment values may also be contributing to inadequate daily assessment of student achievement in some classrooms. Since we have rarely inquired into the quality of teacher-developed tests, offered training in classroom assessment, or included classroom assessment in the principal’s leadership role, we simply do not know how well teachers measure student achievement or how to help them if they need help” (Stiggins, 1985, p. 72).

Hills also criticizes teachers who allow discipline to enter into assessment. Students who do not bring their pencil, book, or homework to class or who get caught cheating on tests often get zeros or “Fs” on work. Other teachers assign zeros for late work. These zeros are then averaged together to arrive at a final grade. It takes only a few nonacademic zeros to result in a D or F for the term. Hills feels that “grades should *not* be used for disciplinary purposes. If a grade is altered as a way of inflicting punishment, it no longer accurately reflects academic achievement, and its proper meaning is destroyed” (Hills, 1991, p. 541). In order for teachers’ evaluations to be meaningful, they must be based on the same criteria. Many parents say they look to standardized tests to provide the norm-referenced or criterion-based data that is often inconsistent or erratic in classroom grades.

Role of Administrators

The role school administrators play in setting standards for classroom assessments and monitoring their effectiveness is minimal. Like classroom teachers, most administrators have had little or no training in assessment themselves; therefore, they cannot provide the guidance to help teachers develop and use appropriate assessments that can meet the needs of all of the students (Hills, 1991).

Observation checklists of teacher performance are just beginning to include categories for assessment. It is also not uncommon to have good teachers create ambiguous assessments that do not measure what was taught and that penalize poor test-takers or poor readers. These teachers do not mean to cause students to feel insecure, to lower their self-esteem, or to fail, but they just do not know how to test. One still hears stories of teachers leaving blanks on tests for students to fill in the exact words of the textbook. Memorization is being emphasized instead of thinking skills. Administrators, therefore, need to assume a more proactive role by working with teachers



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