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Extensions

Why Fuss with Educational Testing?

Chapter 1's Assessment-Related Understanding

Twin Motivations for Assessment Knowledge: Those who care about our schools should understand educational-assessment basics not only because inappropriate tests are often leading to mistaken high-stakes decisions, but also because classroom formative assessment is being underused.

BETTER UNDERSTANDING AN UNDERSTANDING

Although reasons for learning about educational measurement exist beyond the two motivations set forth in this chapter's understanding, those two reasons are particularly powerful in light of today's educational context. Indeed, either one of the two reasons—all by itself—should spur most people to learn more about educational testing.

Chapter 1's first reason for studying educational testing's basics—namely, to diminish the number of bone-headed decisions currently based on educational tests—is enormously important. In recent years, *literally* millions of children have been less well-educated because shoddy test-based policies have been installed and implemented. The most obvious instance of bone-headedness can be seen when the instructional quality of a school or a district is based chiefly on students' performances on "accountability" tests that have never been shown as suitable for such an evaluative mission. High scores on such tests are thought to be caused by successful instruction. Low scores indicate the opposite.

However, the tests were often developed exclusively to compare the performances of test-takers, and were never demonstrated *by any evidence whatsoever* to be capable of distinguishing between effectively taught and ineffectively taught students. Thus, such high-stakes accountability tests often supply a misleading estimate of a school's educational success—typically measuring what students bring to school in the way of differing affluence-determined experiences or inherited academic aptitudes. As a consequence, numerous errors are made in judging educational quality.

Many *effective* schools, because the wrong tests are being used, are evaluated negatively—so their staffs are urged to alter how students are being taught. On the other hand, many *ineffective* schools, because their students score well on the wrong kinds of accountability tests, are erroneously commended for their fine performance, hence urged to continue the dismal instructional practices they are currently employing. Who loses out in these far too frequent scenarios? Clearly, it is the kids.

Surely, many teachers and school administrators are being misjudged, and such misjudgments suck. Genuinely skilled teachers are not properly awarded, and truly inept teachers fail to receive the professional support they so desperately need. But when effective instructional procedures are jettisoned because of students' poor scores on the wrong tests, or

when shabby instruction is allowed to exist because of students' poor scores on the wrong tests, then it is all too apparent that the big losers are the kids themselves and the long-term loser is surely the society allowing such decisions to be made on the basis of students' scores on the wrong tests.

So, in looking at this initial chapter's assessment-related understanding, the first of two powerful reasons that you and others should learn about the fundamentals of educational testing is that misused tests, especially tests misused to make evaluative judgments about educational quality, definitely damage our children.

The second motivational reason embodied in Chapter 1's understanding is that we currently employ formative assessment in our schools far less frequently than we should be. Later in the book, Chapter 8 focuses exclusively on formative assessment. In that chapter, the nature and dividends of the formative-assessment process are addressed. Evidence, lots of it, that's supportive of formative assessment is trotted out for you. But for the time being, please believe that this potent *assessment-based* instructional procedure can provide huge educational benefits to students. Not to use it more frequently in our schools constitutes a whopping sin of omission.

So in a brief revisit to this chapter's assessment-related understanding, we see that we're (1) misusing certain educational tests and (2) underusing a potent assessment-rooted instructional strategy. Those two deficits, clearly, need to be corrected.

COLLEGIAL CONJECTURING

Please review the contents of the fictitious e-mail below that was supposedly sent wafting through the ether to you by a colleague. If you wished to reply to the person who sent you the boxed e-mail, what would your electronic reply say? Remember, if you are carrying out this activity as part of a group, then different participants' responses can be

collaboratively considered by the group's members. If you are cruising through this *Online Supplement* solo, you will still find it useful to consider the *strengths* or *weaknesses* of how you might respond to your colleague.

**TO: A READER OF THE ABCS FROM:
A MAKE-BELIEVE COLLEAGUE (AND FAST FRIEND)
SUBJECT: ENOUGH SCHOOL TESTING ALREADY!**

Hi:

I just had to write you today about several articles in our local newspapers—stories that I'm sure you'll have a reaction to. The articles all concern the excessive usage of educational tests in our schools. I know you've recently been thinking about the proper use of such tests, and I'm wondering whether you think what's being proposed by a nearby school district's board of education makes any sense.

Let me be more specific. Two weeks ago, our district's five-member school board *unanimously* transmitted a resolution to parents of the district's students asking those parents to have their children opt out of our state's annual standardized accountability tests. Those tests, in the resolution passed by the board, are seen as "too time-consuming, too costly, and of scant instructional value when educating children." The board's resolution even went on to say that if parents were inclined to do so, they could urge their children's teachers to dramatically reduce the amount of *classroom testing*—using teacher-made tests—because the total array of standardized tests so clearly gets in the way of students' learning.

So, what's your take on this board action? Does any of it make sense to you? Frankly, I find myself leaning toward the school board's stance because we often hear complaints from students about "too much testing." Please get back to me soon, because there's an open board meeting coming up on this resolution in two weeks. I plan to attend, and I don't want to look like a total ninny.

THOUGHT-PROVOCATION QUERIES

Please consider one or more of the following four queries related to this chapter's assessment-related understanding. Having done so, if the question(s) provoke even the tiniest bit of thought on your part, then consider how you might answer the question(s) you chose. Incidentally, I could have referred to these simply as "questions," but don't you agree that the use of "queries" adds a considerable touch of class to this activity?

Query 1. *The ABCs'* initial chapter tries to set forth a two-barreled rationale for someone to master a collection of understandings linked to educational testing. Do you think both barrels are really needed, or would *either* the misuse of high-stakes test results or the underutilization of the formative-assessment process be sufficiently motivating all by itself?

Query 2. Early on in *The ABCs*, it is stated that the book was written for the following target audiences: classroom teachers, educational administrators, education policymakers, parents of school-age children, and everyday citizens—in an undisguised attempt to help members of those five groups become more conversant with basic notions of educational testing. Do you believe it is possible to rank-order those five audiences according to which groups are more important to reach in this regard? If so, what would your rank-ordering look like (from the most important audience to the least important audience)?

Query 3. In Chapter 1's short history of U.S. educational testing, it was pointed out that so-called "accountability tests" became particularly influential after the enactment of federal legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Such statutes stipulated the annual use of standardized tests as one way of ascertaining how effectively the nation's children were being taught. Those federal requirements, because federal funds were being used to support specified educational activities, seemed quite reasonable to

most observers. However, what if the accountability tests being selected by state education officials were flat-out wrong? What if the chosen tests provided an inaccurate and misleading picture of educational success? How can well-intentioned educational laws, either federal or state statutes, guard against inept implementation of those laws?

Query 4. Chapter 1 contends that substantial segments of our populace, particularly those segments of society most concerned with the quality of our schools, are remarkably ill-informed regarding educational assessment. Moreover, it is implied in Chapter 1 that many individuals *don't really know that they don't know* about educational testing. After all, most of today's adults completed a number of standardized or teacher-made tests during their own days as students, hence many adults consider themselves reasonably conversant with the ins and outs of educational testing. Do you think our nation's level of assessment literacy is really so low as seems to be implied in Chapter 1's assessment-related understanding? Why or why not?

A REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

This activity is intended for use in settings where a group of individuals is collaboratively digging deeper into the content of *The ABCs*. As indicated earlier in this *Online Supplement*, a reader who has no structured interactions with others readers of *The ABCs* might still benefit from mentally isolating the chief factors to be stressed during a collaborative implementation of the group-exercise *described below in italics*.

CONVERTING THE INCREDULOUS

(A GROUP EXERCISE)

The group's total members should be divided into two or more sub-groups, each of whom is to take turns playing two roles. First, a

subgroup must plan and present a persuasive case intended to convince the undecided members of a particular school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) to initiate a serious, year-long self-study of educational testing. Second, a subgroup (perhaps along with other subgroups) must serve as an audience of teachers and parents who are being convinced to endorse such a study of educational testing.

As matters currently stand, many of this fictitious school's PTA members are uncertain about the merits of such a lengthy self-study commitment. Making the promotion of assessment literacy, that is, attempting to enhance teachers' and parents' knowledge about educational testing, will constitute a nontrivial commitment of both time and resources. Many teachers and parents, frankly, think that there are other more compelling topics for a year-long self-study effort of this sort. Each subgroup's task, therefore, is to devise an optimally convincing presentation to persuade other PTA members that a year-long focus on educational testing is what's most needed at this time.

Each subgroup should caucus for no more than 20 minutes to plan a panel-presentation of 5–10 minutes to others in the group. After the panel presentation is ready, then a subgroup actually presents its ideas to other participants in as compelling a fashion as possible. Thereupon, a 5–10 minute segment is allocated to questions or comments from the floor (that is, from members of the group who, at that moment, are playing the roles of other PTA members). Answers to these from-the-floor questions or responses to from-the-floor comments must be supplied by the panelists.

If time permits, it is usually helpful to spend a few "no-pretend" moments—having shed the activity-required roles of being panel presenters or members of a PTA audience—to constructively critique the quality of various subgroups' presentations. What is being fostered is an individual's grasp of the key requirements needed to persuade others to promote the assessment literacy. Although the fictional players in this exercise are parents and teachers, many of the arguments and persuasion ploys used in this setting will be applicable to other groups.