

A Personalized Preface for *Teachers*

I recently wrote *The ABCs of Educational Testing: Demystifying the Tools That Shape Our Schools* about educational tests and how they should be (and shouldn't be) used. From this point forward, for brevity's sake, that book will be referred to as *The ABCs*. The book was written for five different audiences, namely, teachers, school administrators, educational policymakers, parents of school-age children, and members of the public. All five of those groups have a serious stake in the success of our schools. Moreover, educational testing plays a pivotal, often unrecognized, role in how effectively our children are educated. However, while it may be efficient to aim a book simultaneously at multiple groups of readers, such a strategy prevents an author from exploring particular topics that might be of interest to a specific group of readers. Accordingly, I am taking the following opportunity to address several issues that may be of special interest to one of those five reader-groups, in this instance to classroom teachers.

GOING TO THE MATTRESSES

“Going to the mattresses” is an oft-cited phrase from *The Godfather* film describing the decision of a group of mob soldiers to hide out until they are either safe or called on to fight. In the case of *The Godfather*, the mob members’ mattress-sleeping was accompanied by ample portions of non-aromatic but delicious looking Italian pasta. In a sense, “going to the mattresses” can be seen as preparing for an approaching conflict.

Well, when it comes to educational testing, I believe classroom teachers need to hunker down and ready themselves for ongoing conflict—apt to become even more intense. This is because teachers are evaluated according to their students’ performances on educational tests.

Let’s face it: The notion of using measures of students’ learning to help appraise the quality of teachers’ instruction is not inherently absurd. Indeed, if properly measured, students’ scores on the right sorts of tests can contribute meaningfully to a more defensible evaluation of teachers. Unfortunately, in almost all instances today, evaluations of teachers based on their students’ test scores is seriously flawed. A classroom teacher today who does not understand how to distinguish between test-based teacher evaluations that are sound versus those that are stupid is courting professional suicide.

In a world convinced that the most appropriate indicator of a teacher’s competence is how that teacher’s students score on a test, classroom teachers need to arm themselves by understanding the most important concepts and procedures of educational testing. Yes, although a teacher who comprehends the chief content of educational testing will discover a variety of other ways to benefit students, the teaching profession is currently being assaulted by critics who want to make students’ test scores the dominant—and sometimes the sole—determiner of a teacher’s quality. Moreover, such critics are often attempting to do so by using *inappropriate tests* to accomplish their aim. Clearly, this a time for teachers to go to the mattresses.

YOUR FAMILIARITY WITH TESTING'S FUNDAMENTALS

When you read *The ABCs*, you'll find that I occasionally downplay current teacher's conversance with educational testing. Because I was a high school teacher early in my career, I have both respect and compassion for today's teachers; however, this does not alter the fact that few teachers understand what they really need to know about today's educational assessment. Two reasons exist for this sad state of affairs.

First, in many states there is no legal requirement obliging teachers to take a pre-licensure college course (or a post-licensure professional-development program) focused on educational assessment. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find that many teachers know precious little about educational tests and how they should be used. But, and this will surprise many readers of *The ABCs*, many teachers who actually *did* complete a college-level course dealing with educational testing are not much better off. As you'll soon be reading, for almost a full century the conception of educational measurement has been mired in a single way of thinking about educational testing. That is, we've believed educational tests must have a comparative measurement mission in which tests are constructed so as to provide score-based comparisons among test-takers. Our tests, particularly our standardized tests, have been built to accomplish this comparative function—even though for several decades we have tried to use these comparison-focused tests to (1) evaluate instructional quality and (2) improve instruction. Teachers who have completed a college course regarding educational testing, therefore, have typically learned about a traditional, comparatively focused way of testing students, a procedure inconsistent with the current demands being placed on educational tests.

It is possible, of course, that if you completed a university-level course in educational measurement, it may have been taught in a less traditional manner and in a way consonant with today's demands on educational testing. If so, then you

may already be familiar with the sorts of assessment-related understandings addressed in *The ABCs*. But be not dismayed if your grasp of educational testing's fundamentals is less than you'd prefer. After reading *The ABCs*, a flock of currently held confusions will vanish.

A DOUBLE-BARRELED RATIONALE

In Chapter 1 of *The ABCs*, a two-part rationale is provided to support someone's becoming more knowledgeable about the basics of educational assessment. Although such a rationale works for any potential readers of the book, each of those two parts are particularly pertinent to teachers.

A long while ago, I started out as a high school teacher in Oregon. Several of my colleagues have suggested that those early teaching experiences must have taken place so long ago that Oregon was still a territory rather than a state. My colleagues err—but not by much. Yet, whenever I take a mental recollection trip back to my days as a Social Studies/English teacher in Heppner High School, I can say with confidence that Chapter 1's two-part rationale would have won me over in an instant. Here's why.

The first reason trotted out in Chapter 1 for someone to increase their understandings regarding educational tests is that students' scores on standardized tests are being used to evaluate teachers—and in most instances the wrong tests are being used for this purpose. Back when I was teaching, standardized tests played no role—none at all—in how my fellow teachers and I were evaluated. However, had such tests been used to help determine my effectiveness, you can bet I'd want to find out what sorts of tests should and shouldn't be used to evaluate me. Anyone would—or should.

The second reason supporting someone's learning more about educational testing focuses on a test-based *instructional* process called *formative assessment*. When used appropriately, formative assessment can effectively double the speed of students' learning.

Back then, when I was churning out my early lesson plans, I yearned to be successful. Most teachers do. I wanted to be a terrific teacher because, as is the case with most people, I wanted to be a winner at what I was doing. Had I been made aware that an assessment-rooted approach to instruction would have made me a more successful teacher, do you think I'd have hesitated before learning about the innards of this potent instructional strategy? In Chapter 8 of *The ABCs* you'll find a description of formative assessment—a research-confirmed process I would have installed with glee when I was a secondary school teacher.

In sum, because today's teachers are often being evaluated with inappropriate tests, and because formative assessment can markedly enhance a teacher's effectiveness, classroom teachers should find especially persuasive Chapter 1's two-part rationale promoting increased understanding of educational testing. If I were allowed to have a "do over" with my high-school teaching stint, I assure you I would have readily succumbed to this alluring two-part persuasion ploy.

PROFESSIONALISM DEMANDS IT

Every true profession sits securely on a bedrock construct delineating how the competence of that profession's members can be determined. Lawyers, especially those litigators who do battle in a courtroom, are judged according to the number of verdicts that go their way. For a litigator not to understand the nuances of how judges or juries arrive at their decisions would be daft. Similarly, physicians need to be well-versed in understanding the laboratory tests that indicate whether their patients are getting better or worse. To be a physician who is baffled by the results of basic laboratory analyses is almost unthinkable. Similarly, given developments in the way American schools and teachers have been evaluated since the middle of the last century, teachers who do not possess a reasonable hunk of knowledge about the tools that supply the evidence of students' learning

(and, thereby, of teachers' skill) are teachers who can quite accurately be regarded as *unprofessional*.

Whereas we could get away with it back when I was teaching, education's evaluation game has changed dramatically. Educational testing is no longer an esoteric process known only to measurement specialists. No, educational tests intersect with almost all of the truly important decisions made by educators these days. Your students' parents, for example, will expect that you are reasonably conversant with the most important concepts and procedures involved in educational assessment. Such an expectation, especially these days, is altogether reasonable. Happily, the most important notions in educational testing are remarkably commonsensical, as you will discover when reading *The ABCs*. You can scurry through its 10 chapters without ever being overwhelmed by any technically traumatizing content. The most pivotal concepts and procedures of educational testing are sublimely straightforward and easy to understand. After you've strolled through *The ABCs'* ten fun-filled chapters, you'll emerge as a sufficiently knowledgeable possessor of educational testing's key content. Teacher to teacher, I promise it!

W. James Popham