



Field Note

Testing as teachers' work

This short note from a field study turns up little that is unexpected, but points out that the notorious ambivalence of teachers towards the use of tests deserves a closer look. Academics and others who live by the logic of their analyses have perhaps been making rather too easy assumptions about the real nature of a teacher's work.

Testing is a ubiquitous feature of elementary schools. Preparing for tests, and discussing the results of tests, are near-daily activities in many classrooms.

Most of the research on testing, however, is conducted by, and from the standpoint of, people with considerable expertise in testing. It is not surprising, then, that such studies frequently conclude that problems in testing in schools are due to lack of knowledge among teachers and administrators, and that the solution is to have educators learn more about the proper use and interpretation of tests.

Such a perspective underrates the degree to which current school testing practices are a result of the conditions of school activity. Current testing practices can be analyzed as the result of a purposeful and rational response to real demands and constraints.

The Peel Testing Practices Study attempted to assess testing from such a "subjectivist" point of view. The study assessed testing practices in about 120 elementary schools in the Peel Board of Education, with emphasis on grades 1 to 5. The study was designed to assess the potential impact of a major new policy on the evaluation of student achievement, which had been adopted by the system.

Data for the study came from two main sources. Open-ended, structured interviews were conducted with a stratified sample of 140 Peel elementary teachers (about 13% of

the total staff). The responses of these teachers in interview were validated through a comparison with the results of similar questions contained in a written survey of an additional 300 teachers. Results on both instruments were very similar, suggesting that the less structured portions of the interview data would also have good reliability. Secondly, all elementary school principals were asked to complete a survey regarding school-level testing practices and policies; responses were received from 83% of the principals.

The interviews focussed less on the actual use of tests - although this was probed - than on the reasons for, attitudes towards, and understanding of tests and testing by teachers. The interviews probed the uses of standardized tests of achievement and ability, of diagnostic tests, and of teacher-made tests. Data analysis was conducted both by coding and computer analysis of the interviews, and by a qualitative approach based on intensive study of the interview protocols.

Some expected findings

The study found, as have others, that testing of one sort or another is very frequent in elementary classrooms. Teacher-made tests are by far the most common form. Any standardized testing of achievement and ability is usually the result of school or district policies. A variety of formal diagnostic tests are used unevenly by relatively few teachers.

The technical aspects of testing were generally ignored by teachers or administrators. Teachers were basically unable to give explanations about how they constructed their own tests. (Standardized tests tended to be used because they happened to be known to the teacher, or were readily available, or were inexpensive.)

The integration of test results with teaching was also rather haphazard. Although principals cited the monitoring of program and of individual progress as prime reasons for school-wide testing, teachers rarely saw any such use of results by their principals. The results of school-wide tests were sometimes recorded in students' files, but often they were simply discarded. For individual teachers, on the other hand, use was a little different. The test results were compared with other indicators of students' progress, and were used for grouping students. However, tests tended to be seen as only one part of the picture - and that a less important part than, say, a teacher's observations of students in the classroom.

Finally, knowledge about testing is limited. Even such terms as "standardized", "diagnostic", or "norm" are not understood by many. Needless to say, an appropriate use of tests is thereby rendered more unlikely.

What is the explanation?

None of this was very surprising, but some of the other findings were more difficult to understand. Teachers expressed great ambivalence about testing, continuing to test while expressing many reservations about the value of the results. Nor did teachers seem to make serious efforts to change either their knowledge of testing or their use of tests. There are two possible explanations for these anomalies. Either teachers are irrational people (which we doubt), or they have good reasons for doing things the way they do. In fact, the interview data provided substantial support for the latter supposition.

The way teachers use tests can be understood properly only if it is considered in the context of the overall set of tasks facing any teacher. Testing is not seen by those in the schools as a technical activity with a purpose of its own, but as a means for a teacher to meet several organizational objectives. An examination of several of the tasks facing teachers shows this relationship clearly.

Teachers have to organize students for instruction. Given the number of students in many classes, this cannot easily be done through giving one's attention to individual students. Standardized tests provide a recognized basis for making grouping decisions about students. Thus the large amount of testing done in the fall of each year.

Sometimes teachers have concerns about individual students, and wish to receive additional attention for them. A referral for assessment or special education is more likely to be successful if accompanied by some objective data, such as test results. Here we have a second reason for testing.

Teachers feel that they should be able to demonstrate student learning over the year. Principals are often interested in seeing the gains classes of students have made during the school year. Hence the preference for school-wide testing in the late spring.

Teachers tend to feel great uncertainty about the extent to which their work is successful. Theirs is an activity in which results are elusive and hard to measure. Tests provide one - supposedly objective - measure of the success of instruction or of any lack of it.

Finally, and probably most importantly, teachers feel the need to be able to justify - to administrators and parents - the approaches they have used and the decisions they have made about individual students. While teachers and principals almost unanimously trust their own judgment about a student ahead of any test data, they also believe that their unsubstantiated opinion will not be enough should some dispute arise about the student. Standardized test results provide evidence for teachers to use to support a course of action which they have taken based on other data altogether. They provide evidence, which principals can use to show they are doing their job.

A rational system

Seen from this perspective, the use of tests in schools becomes immensely rational. Where "a test result" is useful or important, a test will be given. Where such a result clashes with the established view of a student, it will be regarded with suspicion. Since parents - who by and large have great respect for tests - do not invoke technical criteria, technical criteria need not be a concern of the school. Since teachers and other educators control the use of tests, the results can be called upon as they are needed, rather than being analyzed systematically. Moreover, since testing is not held in high regard by many educators, acquiring more knowledge about that subject is seldom a priority.

Schools and teachers test not because they believe in testing, but because testing is useful to them. Thus they can continue to test, while simultaneously expressing major reservations about tests.

In our view it is these day-to-day needs which influence - in fact, determine - the ways in which teachers use tests. This view suggests that significant changes in testing in schools will not come from greater efforts to educate educators about testing. Insofar as current testing practices meet a variety of very real needs of teachers and principals, changes in those practices will need to arise from changes in the demands that educators perceive. In other words, to redirect the conduct of testing in schools, we will need to alter the conditions which have given rise to current practices. Ignorance is not the issue; changing working requirements is.

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