

PHONY ADVERTISING: INSTRUCTIONALLY BENEFICIAL STANDARDIZED TESTS

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It is a commonly held view, not only by educators, but also by the public, that standardized educational tests are a useful way to determine students' achievement levels and evaluate educators' effectiveness. Most people also believe standardized tests can also supply data that make a meaningful contribution to teachers' instruction—showing them where, for example, student knowledge is lacking and where additional teaching is required. Sadly, there is much more belief in the instructional virtues of standardized tests than there is evidence to support their use for instructional purposes.

To understand why the instructional promises of standardized educational tests outstrip their actual instructional contributions, we must first recognize an important reality about standardized tests. Whether it's an *achievement* test intended to measure students' current knowledge and skills, or an *aptitude* test employed to predict students' future academic performances, every standardized test is designed to spread out students' scores so that meaningful comparisons can be made among all who take it. It is this quest for *comparative* test scores that has led most standardized educational tests to be essentially useless for instruction. Let's see why.

What a teacher wants from a test is *actionable* information. In other words, when a teacher looks at a student's score on a test—or the collective test scores of many students—what that teacher wants to see are results that provide information about what to do next. For example, if certain students in an elementary teacher's class are struggling with subject-verb agreement, the teacher needs to know *which* students are having this trouble. Once those students are identified, the teacher can provide the strugglers with some targeted instruction about subject-verb agreement.

The instructional payoff of an educational test, whether it is a nationally standardized exam or a teacher-made classroom test, is that the test's results help teachers decide their best next steps. Yet, the inherently comparative mission of standardized educational tests meaningfully mucks up such tests' instructional contributions. A test focused chiefly on coming up with comparative scores is a test unable to make optimal contributions to a teacher's instructional decision making.

For any test to really help teachers make suitable "what-next" instructional decisions, that test's results need be reported at an appropriate "grain size." If the report's grain size is too broad, such as a test score indicating whether the student "can read with comprehension and understanding," the teacher can't discern where to aim next-step instruction. If the report's grain-size is too narrow, such as indicating whether a student answered *each* item correctly or incorrectly, the teacher becomes overwhelmed with too much undigested item-by-item information. Selecting an instructionally appropriate grain-size for a test clearly requires a Cinderella, "just right" decision.

Although it is *possible* to build standardized tests so that they describe students' performances at a suitable grain-size, this is incredibly difficult to accomplish. After all, these tests aim to measure students' mastery of a meaningful expanse of content while also attempting spread out students' scores to permit comparisons. The comparative thrust of standardized tests—whether they are aimed at achievement or aptitude—simply beclouds the instructional utility of those tests.

Whether such falsely labeled "instructionally helpful" standardized tests are being peddled by commercial testing companies or by state and district education officials, users must not be swayed by their pro-instruction promises. Yes, if one deliberately sets out to provide educators with instructionally actionable next-step information, it is possible to construct tests that can help teachers teach better. But to do so effectively, a standardized test would need to downplay its traditional mission of providing results that compare test-takers.

In short, standardized tests purporting to help teachers provide improved instruction need to be accompanied by solid evidence that they do indeed serve that promised function. Absent this evidence, we must recognize the claims as what they are: sales pitches.

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