

Achievement Tests—Just One Tool

This selection is an excerpt from *Teacher to Teacher*, January 2003.

Nationally standardized achievement tests have been an expanding part of education in America since the end of World War II. In recent years they have been looked upon as tools to measure whether a child is suited to progress to the next grade or to be accepted into college. These tests have also been used to judge what students are taught and whether the quality of schooling is satisfactory. But are achievement tests up to that?

Such tests are meant to assess a child's general knowledge of subject matter and to relate to parents and teachers a student's general progression in a particular field of study compared to other students across the board. At their best, tests help to pinpoint a student's successes and shortcomings; but if results are misapplied, the same tests can stir up anger and dissension between parents and educators and leave many pondering how much, if any, education goes on at school.

One reason that achievement tests cannot do more than they are intended to do is that standardized tests sometimes focus on out-of-classroom knowledge or knowledge a child already possesses. Dr. James Popham, an expert on educational testing and professor emeritus at the University of California at Los Angeles, uses an example to explain this thought. A certain test question asks the child which item of food is not a fruit. The correct answer is celery, but as Dr. Popham points out, a child whose family rarely purchases celery is at a disadvantage compared to the child who may see celery on his plate routinely.

Also, classrooms and curriculums can differ in what is taught and at what level it is taught, which makes it difficult for test writers to make tests completely fair for everyone. According to Popham's article "Why Standardized Tests Don't Measure Educational Quality," some studies gather that as much as fifty percent of materials on standardized tests may not be sufficiently covered by the textbooks students use. This gap demonstrates testing companies' nearly impossible task of finding the similar elements of various textbooks and incorporating them into an hour-long test that acts as more than just a basic knowledge examination.

Another challenge of the standardized test makers is testing a student's written or oral skills, which in many cases are a student's strongest. For instance, some students may finish in the 90th percentile when a test is read to them; but after taking the same test alone, they may receive much poorer results. Some colleges have begun experimenting with open-ended questions in their entrance examinations, but these are few and far between. They still leave room for dispute over who grades them and how to make questions that are unaffected by bias.

The overriding principle we all need to hold onto is that tests are not the only means for determining a child's performance in school. It is important to look at not only the tests themselves but also a myriad of other factors. We must look at grades, the amount of effort being put forth by the child, the student's natural ability, child's ability to apply what he learns, and his eventual pursuit of more learning, to name a few. A test score is only one tool by which we can assess education. Because without tests, an education can still be valued; but apart from an education, tests have no value.

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