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ABSTRACT

The concepts of competency can be conceptually separated into two dimensions: minimum competency testing (MCT) and competency based education (CBE). One of the major weaknesses of the MCT movement is the growing reliance on single test scores as indicators of the total capability of students. Minorities do not reject the idea of competence, but they oppose the use of MCT as a rationale for organizational resegregation or as a justification for maintaining the status quo by denying mobility and choices to minority groups. CBE may change the educational process by structuring educational goals around specific outcomes; and by using various measures to diagnose individual needs, to provide individualized instruction, to use appropriate and adaptable learning activities, to use flexible scheduling, and to evaluate programs, students, and teachers. MCT alone blames the student for failure, while CBE involves education and support processes to remediate student weaknesses. Minorities are also concerned about the lack of curricular and instructional validity in schools which administer MCTs. Minority groups, although supporting competence, do not support MCT in isolation from the responsibilities which should be borne by the total educational system. (MH)

DO MINORITIES EMBRACE THE CONCEPT OF MINIMUM COMPETENCY?

by

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Preface

To address questions concerning the implications for minority groups of the movement toward minimum competency testing, Robert A. Feldmesser, a senior research sociologist at Educational Testing Service, organized a symposium at the 1979 meeting of the National Council of Measurement in Education. In recognition of the significance of the issue, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation encouraged and supported Dr. Feldmesser's efforts and agreed to publish the papers presented in order to bring them to the attention of a wide audience.

The following paper was one of those presented at the symposium. We hope that its appearance in print will sensitize the educational community and the general public to the issues involved and will stimulate discussion and a search for satisfactory solutions.

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Do Minorities Embrace the Concept of Minimum Competency?

Ronald H. Lewis

Overview of the Minimum-Competency Movement

According to a broad range of our population, the minimum-competency movement could be the major school reform of the 20th century. This opinion, however, is far from unanimous. Vernon Jordan of the National Urban League has called it "the great American education fad of the 1970's"; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Alliance of Black School Educators have also expressed grave concern over it.

This movement's basic rationale, as practiced in numerous communities, is quite simple: State or local districts should set minimum standards of performance and test student proficiency in meeting those standards. This will result in more competent students--just like that! While there is almost universal acceptance of the need for the concept, there is only minimal agreement on how best to attack the problem.

Some minorities believe that the competency movement is merely another reflection of a new conservatism sweeping the country. Others feel that competency requirements are good in that they have forced the re-examination of programs and of student progress and have gotten parents and the general public a little more interested and involved in schools. A different view of the minimum-competency movement is that legislators are expressing their frustration and failure to get at the total educational system through any other means of accountability. Thus, can be called an "educational consumer" movement or a simplistic, political, and naive reaction to the public's frustrations about education's complex problems and the poor performance of students.

Minimum-Competency Testing and Competency-Based Education

There are some important distinctions that must be made among the proliferation of terms that have to do with competency. We have competency-based education, competency testing, competency standards, basic competencies, minimal competencies, competency programs, minimum-competency testing, minimum-competency standards, minimum proficiencies, competency-based evaluation, competency levels, minimal-competency requirements, and so on. Educators do have a penchant for communicative overkill! The term has been reduced to such a level of conglomerate absurdity that it may take the public years to find out what we're all talking about.

For purposes of this presentation, I think it's important to separate the concept into two dimensions: minimum-competency testing (MCT) and competency-based education (CBE). The use of tests as a means of determining when performance is satisfactory in relationship to some preset criterion or standard is a common practice. Unfortunately, there is a growing feeling that the use of minimum-competency tests will in and of itself result in greater student achievement. But tests don't teach; they look for the right answer, not the

process of thought the student used to read it. Readers of this publication do not have to be reminded that single-criterion evaluation of students or teachers is a mindless approach to the problem of low student achievement. This is one of the major weaknesses in the MCT movement. Despite all the past emphasis on multivariate indicators, on options to paper-and-pencil tests, on criterion- or objective-referenced tests, we are still using test scores as the sole indicator of a student's total capability.

CBE, however, may necessitate restructuring the schools and the educational process. Educational goals would be structured around specific outcomes rather than around course and subject completion. Specifically stated objectives, use of various measures, if necessary, to diagnose individual needs and increase the possiblity of the individualization of instruction, selection of appropriate and adaptable learning activities, flexible use of time, program evaluation, student and staff evaluation from K-12--these are all part of the philosophy of sequential and systematic CBE. This differs from the simplistic back-to-basics approach using a narrowly conceived set of minimums. Black Americans are keenly sensitive to that distinction. Competency testing merely blames the victim for his or her accumulated deficit, which may be the result of systemic, economic, teacher, resource, or administrative malfunctions rather than the student's failure. Competency-based education involves a broader spectrum of education and support processes. The magnifying glass of scrutiny is therefore placed upon all the elements and participants in the educational enterprise, not merely the student.

Testing and Minorities

Bernard Watson, vice president of academic affairs at Temple University, has said that there are literally tens of thousands of counselors, teachers, admissions officers, employers, and others who think test scores really describe and summarize the essential and inherent complexity of the individual (29). We do seem to believe in the magic of numbers. If we can take human qualities or characteristics, reduce them to quantitative terms, analyze or treat these quantities with sophisticated techniques, and come out with a number or set of numbers, we think we have described the essential and important abilities or talents of an individual.

The people who now realize that test scores can vary from day to day and test to test are on the right track. Every examination, every judgment about people, is fallible and has a typical error rate. The standard error of measurement associated with scores or standardized tests is well known because it is readily determined and regularly announced by the publishers. It is also readily ignored by many.

Curricular validity and instructional validity have also become major concerns of many members of the minority community. Curricular validity refers to the extent to which test items represent the objectives of the curriculum.

In order to determine curricular validity, a comparison must be made between test objectives and the schools' course objectives. In order to demonstrate instructional validity, some measure is needed of whether or not the school district's stated objectives were actually taught in the classroom. A school system that cannot assure curricular and instructional validity should not use competency tests as a basis for denying promotion or a diploma to any of its students. Many systems do not explore these prerequisites in even a perfunctory way. A violation of substantive due process then becomes possible, because the students may be penalized even though they cannot be personally faulted for poor performance on the test.

Lest there be misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I am not saying that we should abandon tests or refuse to use them in an appropriate manner. Tests can be helpful tools. Used properly, and in conjunction with other measures, they can be extremely helpful. Unfortunately, we also use test scores and their "magical" qualities as a justification for failure to teach students, especially those who are poor and who are members of minority groups. We accept the rhetoric and misinformation of social researchers; we feel sorry for minority students, patronize them, don't place too many demands on them because "they have enough problems as it is," and we accept inferior work from them. Doing so is an excuse for avoiding the possibility of adequately teaching poor and minority youngsters; of reexamining our attitudes about expectancy; of exploring anew the world of learning theory and learning style; and of examining more closely the adequacy of support for programs of prevention in addition to programs of intervention.

We seem to always revert to extremes: Either the victims of oppression are blamed for their condition or they are patronized so that they still don't receive the advantages of educational opportunity. Since testing is so much a part of our political, social, and educational decision-making processes, I must remind you that test scores are not neutral. They represent judgments about values important in this society. However, tests only inform such judgments; they shouldn't make them. As we enter the minimum-competency era, we have a professional responsibility to make conscious and consistent efforts to see to it that tests do not continue to be used as judgmental screening devices, as tools to limit the aspirations and hopes of individuals, as devices designed to reinforce the status quo or to deny upward mobility and a wide range of choices to members of minority groups. Unless MCT is a logical outgrowth of a restructured performance-based curriculum with curricular and instructional consistency; unless MCT is used as one dimension of an accountability review of the performance level of teachers and administrators; unless local, state, and national officials resist the growing tendency to further limit resources, our minority young people will continue to be victimized, patronized, and/or excluded.

We live in a highly diverse, competitive, meritocratic, credential-oriented society, where winning has become so prized as to become often an end in itself. Test results have had, and continue to have, a strong impact upon public policy. But public policy should be more cognizant of the need to

consider the inherent responsibilities of all the members of the educational family, not just those of the students. Otherwise, testing will only continue to help weave the fiber of racism in the United States, resulting in still more proliferation of policies that promote inequitable and unethical behavior and treatment.

Diplomas and Remediation

Issuing multiple diplomas is a procedure that ought not to be dignified with argument. In connection with MCT, Virginia, for example, offers a level 4 diploma, which is comparable to graduating with honors; a level 3 diploma indicating 18 credits and passing the minimum-competency test; a level 2 diploma indicating either the 18 credits or passing the minimum-competency test; and a certificate of attendance to cover all other cases. Elsewhere, we are getting standard diplomas, standard diplomas with academic or with vocational endorsement, with or without a certificate of basic competencies; certificates of basic competencies or certificates of attendance, or both, without a diploma, and so on. It hardly needs to be pointed out that minority students will be awarded certificates of attendance in disproportionate numbers--one more subterfuge in our infamous record of devices used to exclude rather than to include.

Some black parents, while not opposed to MCT itself, see a possible racial motive behind testing programs established in recently desegregated communities to "protect standards." The result of such programs can be organizational resegregation within the school on the basis of test results. If the basic motivation for the stress upon standards is strictly educational, it is not difficult to devise ways of rendering assistance to students without separating, labeling, and alienating them.

Some schools deal with the problem of student failure by assigning students to a less demanding curriculum or track; by not allowing them to be promoted or to graduate until they can demonstrate their mastery and/or use of basic skills; by encouraging or allowing them to drop out or to be pushed out of school; by allowing them to be promoted or graduated without having mastered or applied basic skills; or by withholding a regular high school diploma from them. Each of these responses penalizes the students involved but does not assure that they will ultimately master basic skills as a result of the penalty. Meanwhile, those who may be at least partially responsible for poor student performance are not held accountable.

Other schools focus their efforts on helping students by providing some form of individualized instruction by means of teacher aides, peer instruction, programmed instruction, smaller classes, skill labs, special materials, and so on. When necessary, they temporarily assign students to classes that devote more time and effort to the mastery and use of basic skills as a part of the regular course content. They establish after-school or summer tutorial

programs. They identify students' weaknesses in specific basic skills areas early in the students' school career and continuously therefore provide them with special assistance to develop the required skills. And, finally, they work with parents to teach them how to help their children learn basic skills at home.

Despite efforts like these, few effective remedial programs have been developed and maintained, especially at the secondary level. Are future programs going to be more substantive simply because of the minimum-competency movement? Will future programs be better articulated and coordinated with the regular classrooms than current programs? These questions become particularly significant in light of the fact that many of these young people have been receiving remedial help anyway. The concept of remediation, while acceptable, must be exposed to additional and intensive scrutiny because it is being utilized more and more frequently as a method of redress for minority students.

Here are a few examples of the difficulties we are facing in making good on the promise of remediation:

1. If we try to extend the school day or the school year for the purpose of remediation, we run into the complications of staffing, curriculum, students' and parents' rights, materials, fatigue, scheduling, and of course, teacher and administrator negotiations and contracts.

2. Confusion, misunderstanding, and resentment arise among many school employees charged with the responsibility for remedial work.

3. There is the nagging problem of where to give remedial services. Should we pull the students out of their regular classrooms or provide the services within the classroom?

4. The typical teacher is not trained to provide proper remedial services. More exposure to the same teaching methods in small groups four or five times a week for a half an hour a day won't have much effect on students who are having a difficulty learning.

5. Regular classroom teachers complain about their day being interrupted frequently by students going to and returning from remedial programs.

6. There is a major and prevailing complaint regarding the collection of information about remedial students and the necessary planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program.

7. Last, but certainly not least, is the big question of who is going to fund these remedial programs.

Former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano told the National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills in March, 1978 that the federal role will be one of research, conducting technical providing

assistance, and informational clearinghouse. The application of MCT has not involved one federal penny to date. Meanwhile, state funding of remedial or compensatory education programs has experienced difficulties of its own. For example, there is the so-called unduplicated count problem. Some funding formulas do not distinguish between students who need help in one area, like reading or math, and those who need help in both areas. Thus, a student who requires help in two skill areas generates the same amount of state aid for a district as a student who needs remedial assistance in only one. In today's economic climate--what with Proposition 13 and other forms of taxpayers' revolts and cutbacks in federal and state aid to education--how are local districts (or colleges and universities) going to finance the necessary remedial programs?

As legislators discuss the concept of competencies and remediation, perhaps they should assure us that some additional resources go into the education of your youth rather than simply into the reduction of property taxes. This may be difficult, since most legislators feel that too much money is already being expended for the outcomes being achieved by students. The real danger is that the perception or reality of a lack of money could become an excuse for total inaction on the part of some local districts. Some of us will be forced to creatively redirect money that is being used in other areas. But every time we redirect funds, we ultimately affect some local constituency's priority which was established when school districts established their goals and objectives. This becomes painfully obvious when more funds are directed toward remedial programs. A backlash may soon follow from some parents who may be just as intense about the gifted and talented.

Let me repeat, however, that I do not want to throw out the baby with the bath water. The same imagination, creativity, and energy employed to develop tests can be employed to plan, develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate programs of remediation. The problems inherent in teacher and administrator contracts, timing and articulation, flexible grouping without tracking or labeling, use of better diagnostic-prescriptive processes, meaningful communication with students, and so on, will be solved only if we avoid the common tendency to rationalize a concept by employing another concept that is fraught with difficulties. It is difficult for me to accept the notion that the problems of remediation are of such a nature that they cannot be put in priority order and solved. On the other hand, it is not difficult for me to accept the notion that we normally go off on a popular tangent without paying proper attention to what minorities call a "survival detail."

My final caution is simply this: Don't use the term "remediation" lightly! While it has limitless possibilities, today's state of the remedial art is such that it is not the readily available cure-all that it is purported to be.

Conclusions

At its worst, MCT is subject to narrow interpretation and misapplication; it can be used as a club to enhance the effects of poverty and discrimination;

it can be used to transform teachers from artists to technicians; it can be used to transform students from living learners to a sort of robot status in which they are programmed to take tests successfully. At its best, it can be used diagnostically to better help administrators and teachers work with their students, and it could become a vehicle for involving citizens in their school system.

Minorities do readily embrace the concept of competence. However, they do not embrace the emergence of MCT in isolation from the responsibilities that should be borne by the total system. A basic challenge is involved. It lies in the perceived contradiction between the goals of educational excellence and educational equity or opportunity. Many believe that we cannot have both, or that one will always suffer from emphasis on the other. I don't agree with that position, but it will take determination, consistent hard work, and risk taking to keep these concerns in balance.

At the very least, we should allow the two themes of excellence and equity to compete equally. But it would be far better to collectively seek out the various ways for these goals to come together, through multi-cultural curricula, pre-service and in-service training, parent involvement, and above all, a system of competency-based education, not merely minimum-competency testing. It's already been proven, time and time again, especially at some of our major universities, that given the opportunity, minority students can and will overcome their prior oppressed state and attain educational excellence, thus reconciling the supposed dilemma of equity and excellence. This is a matter of record. Yet it is also a matter of record that minorities still have not made appreciable inroads in the various professions.

If the possibilities of MCT are ever to be realized, the movement must be stripped of the cloaks of romanticism and of political and educational expedience. Single thrusts in educational measurement, like MCT, that do not involve accompanying thrusts by other dimensions of the educational enterprise never have and never will have the impact that was intended, despite sporadic and occasional indicators of success. By allowing opportunity, and simultaneously pushing for excellence, whether in regular or remedial settings, we are in essence facilitating the merger of the concepts. If MCT in isolation limits that opportunity, then we are limiting the potential of a major national resource--the minds of young black and brown people--and that would be the greatest tragedy of all.

References

1. Watson, Bernard. Achievement Testing and Basic Skills. Paper presented at the National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills, Washington, D.C., 1978.