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ABSTRACT

The term "coaching" applies to a variety of types of test preparation programs which vary in length, instructional method, and content. Most research on the effectiveness of coaching has examined the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a measure of academic abilities used to predict college performance. This ERIC Digest reviews studies of coaching for the SAT and addresses the effectiveness of coaching. Of several studies reported between 1950 and 1967, the diversity in the research designs used, the types of coaching programs studied, and sample sizes make it difficult to compare results across studies in a meaningful way. In 1980, Slack and Porter synthesized many earlier studies on coaching, concluding that training can effectively help students raise their SAT scores. In 1978-1979, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) studied the effect of commercial coaching on SAT scores. A 1981 synthesis of coaching studies by Messick and Jungeblut included most of the studies in Slack and Porter's report, plus the FTC results. The most recent synthesis included all those studies cited by Slack and Porter, and Messick and Jungeblut. It is concluded that the data support a positive effect of coaching, but the size of the effect estimated from the matched or randomized studies (10 points) seems too small to be practically important. Sixteen bibliographic citations are included. (LMO)

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COACHING FOR TESTS

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COACHING FOR TESTS

DEFINITIONS OF COACHING

The term "coaching" has been applied to a variety of types of test preparation programs, varying in length, instructional method and content.

EFFECTIVENESS OF COACHING

The vast majority of research on the effectiveness of coaching has been oriented toward the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a measure of academic abilities used toward the end of secondary school as a predictor of academic performance in college (6).

Several studies of coaching for the SAT were reported between 1950 and 1967 (2, 7, and 12). The results reported cite score improvements of 0 to 81 points. None attempted to replicate the research methods of the earlier studies. The diversity in the research designs used, the types of coaching programs studied, and sample sizes make it "difficult to compare results across these several studies in a meaningful way" (7, p.202).

In 1980, Slack and Porter synthesized many of the earlier studies on coaching. They concluded that "training for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) can effectively help students raise their scores" (12, p. 154). In response, Jackson noted that some of the studies used by Slack and Porter were "intensive educational programs lasting the better part of a full school year" (4, p. 387). When these studies are not included, the effects of coaching appear to be smaller, in the range of 0 to 47 points.

In 1978-1979, the effect of commercial coaching on SAT scores was studied by the Federal Trade Commission. SAT scores from the students of two coaching schools were analyzed. It was concluded that coaching at one school was effective in raising scores, "contributing on the average approximately 25 points to students' scores" (3). However, the FTC itself admits that the results of this study are somewhat ambiguous, because of its non-experimental design.

A 1981 synthesis of coaching studies (7) included most of the studies included in Slack and Porter's report (12) plus the FTC results. This synthesis noted that the size of the score effects was related to the amount of student contact time during the coaching program. The relationship was nonlinear, however, with the larger amounts of score increase associated with dramatically larger amounts of contact time.

The most recent synthesis of studies on coaching (2) included all those cited by Slack and Porter (12) and by Messick and Jungeblut (7). This synthesis tried to take into account some of the variation in the results caused by research design problems. The results indicated that studies comparing score gains to national norms yielded score increases four times greater than the increases estimated from matched or randomized evaluations. In addition, the matched or randomized study results were more consistent. The authors concluded that "the data do support a positive effect of coaching on SAT scores, but that the size of the coaching effect estimated from the matched or randomized studies (10 points) seems too small to be practically important" (2, p.1).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TESTING PRACTICE

The question of whether coaching is effective is an important one, and has been addressed by the studies described above. Why some coaching programs are effective is even more important, because the answer has significant implications for the use and interpretation of tests. Is it because the student's test-taking skills have improved, because the student's test anxiety has decreased, or because the student has gained knowledge in the areas measured by the test? Hopefully, the research of the future will shed more light on these issues.

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