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ABSTRACT

The advantages and disadvantages of state mandated and locally developed curricula are discussed. State mandates emphasize a measurement philosophy of education in which testing is the name of the game to determine how well students are achieving. One of the advantages of a state mandated curriculum is that the curriculum is aligned with the objectives of instruction for teaching. Students are asked to achieve at a higher level, and exit objectives are more likely to be stressed. However, the setting of objectives may be arbitrary in terms of students levels to be achieved. There are flaws in large-scale state testing, such as inadequate pilot testing or scoring errors. Test writers are at a distance from local classrooms, and standardized tests may not provide enough information about what the individual student needs. The portfolio approach is a local effort at assessment that emphasizes the accomplishments of individual students. Using a portfolio allows the application of constructivist principles and the development of the curriculum internally within the school or classroom to reflect student needs and abilities. (SLD)

# State Mandated Versus A Locally Determined Curriculum

## Marlow Ediger

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## **STATE MANDATED VERSUS A LOCALLY DETERMINED CURRICULUM**

**State mandated objectives and testing has certainly taken over in the nations' schools. Terms such as educational bankruptcy, merit pay, accountability of teachers, high stakes testing, and narrowing the gap in educational achievement between white students and minorities, have become common in education literature and speeches given at teacher education conferences.**

**Toward the other end of the continuum, advocates of contextualism stress the importance of a locally developed curriculum whereby teachers may continually monitor student achievement within an ongoing lesson or unit of study. Continual diagnosis and remediation is stressed here rather than statewide testing in which the results may be available once a year at the most. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach in improving the curriculum?**

### **State Mandated Objectives and Testing**

**State mandates stress a measurement philosophy of education. Testing is the name of the game to determine how well students are achieving. Test items, in most cases, are criterion referenced, in that they are aligned with the state mandated objectives. These objectives developed on the state level are available to teachers to use in teaching. Learning opportunities selected by teachers assist student to achieve the stated objectives. What then are the advantages of state mandated objectives for students to achieve in the classroom?**

**1. the curriculum is aligned with the objectives of instruction for teaching together with the test items used to measure student achievement in realizing the chosen ends.**

**2. students are to achieve at a higher level as compared to previous standards for education. Exit objectives are stressed more frequently in education.**

**3. motivation to learn is there for students in that social promotion from grade to grade is to be ended. Rather learners need to achieve the stated objectives at a certain level of proficiency. Performance rather than seat time is to be emphasized in the curriculum**

**4. objectives are to stress the basics such as reading, writing, and arithmetic/mathematics.**

**5. high expectations for student achievement are to be stressed so that state mandated objectives may be achieved (Ediger, 2000, 503-505).**

**Very frequently, it appears that the advantages of state mandated objectives and testing has an opposite and equal reaction, such as the following:**

1. setting of objectives is arbitrary in terms of student levels to be achieved. Who can determine state levels for an entire student body when individual differences are great among learners in achievement in any school? Witness the number of teachers, for example, who failed a state mandated competency test in Massachusetts; 59% failed the test the first time it was given (Phi Delta Kappan, 2000). The author frequently mentioned to his Methods of Research class that a test could be written for class members whereby almost all would fail every multiple choice item (correct guessing is possible), as well as a test written in which all would obtain 100 % correct response rate . One graduate student questioned the author's ability to write a test whereby all in class would score perfect results. Addition problems with single digit addends were quickly written on the chalkboard for graduate student response. Of course, questions on validity arose pertaining to "was the test valid for the Methods of Research class?" A further question arose on reliability with possible human errors involved in responding!

2. state mandated tests too frequently are not pilot tested adequately, resulting in questionable validity and reliability data.

3. computer scoring errors are definitely possible, even in critical high stakes testing. The National Computer Systems, Inc. in a computer glitch flunked nearly 8,000 students in statewide tests given in Minnesota; 54 seniors were initially denied graduation diplomas due to these costly errors (Education Week, September 6, 2000, 35).

4. each test item is unrelated to the others, whereas in teaching and learning situations, students are to perceive connections in that knowledge is related.

5. writers of test items are external to the local classroom lessons and units taught and cannot have any knowledge of individual students (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Twenty).

It is difficult to develop new acceptable methods of appraising students, other than paper/pencil testing. Gardner (1993) came out with multiple intelligences theory in which learners individually need to have input on how to be assessed. Eight intelligences were identified, indicating that numerous approaches exist to assess student achievement. Garner (1993) lists the following eight intelligences with the author writing a brief description after each as follows:

1. verbal/linguistic intelligence, used in taking paper/pencil tests.
2. visual/spatial, used in planning and developing special projects which relate direct to an ongoing lesson or unit of study. Through observation and considering dimensions, plans need to be made and implemented for project completion.
3. logical/mathematical, used in measuring and critical/creative thinking whereby learners are involved in a hands on approaches in learning.

4. musical/rhythmic, used in setting words from poetry writing to music. The poetry written and the musical compositions of students should relate inherently to what is being taught and learned.

5. interpersonal, used when a learner individually achieves more optimally rather than in cooperative learning.

6. interpersonal intelligence, used to show achievement when students do better in groups or committees rather than individually.

7. bodily/kinesthetic, used in activities involving the gross and finer muscles including artistic endeavors as they relate to objectives in the ongoing lesson being studied.

8. science and the natural environment, used in integrated science units and where objective information is desired. Objective knowledge, irrespective of the observer, is desired in science, as compared to subjective knowledge used in fine arts activities.

A state may use a standardized, also called a norm referenced test, to measure student achievement within its borders.

Generally, these norm referenced tests have no accompanying objectives for teachers to use to gauge their teaching. Thus, the norm referenced test is not aligned with any objectives for students to achieve. These tests have generally been pilot tested more frequently as compared to criterion referenced tests developed on the state level. Norm referenced testing then may be used by specific states to assess learner achievement in different academic and curriculum areas. The following are weaknesses of norm referenced tests:

1. what is tested does not, in many cases, cover what has been taught in the classroom.

2. the teacher usually guesses what might be on a norm referenced test and what should then be taught to students. However, in supervising student teachers in the public schools, the author noticed a copy of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a well known norm referenced test, on a teacher's desk.

3. test writers are far removed from the local classroom where the test is to be administered. These writers then cannot know the developmental level of individual students.

4. norm referenced tests are devised to spread students out on test scores from the 99th down to the first percentile. A bell shaped curve is then adhered to in the development of a norm referenced test.

5. validity figures are provided for reputable norm referenced tests. Validity stresses "a test measuring what it purports to measure." Thus, if a norm referenced test is to measure mathematical computational skills, that becomes the goal of test writers, and that being to write test items pertaining to mathematics computational skills only. Other than mathematics, it is more difficult, for example, to write a test to measure knowledge and skills. Why? School curricula differ so

much from one school , district, or state to another in units of study taught. This makes it difficult to write multiple choice items for a social studies test, for example. Thus, there is much more subjectivity as to what should be measured in a social studies test as compared to computation in mathematics.

6. reliability is much easier to come by as compared to validity. Reliability may emphasize test/retest, alternative forms, and/or internal reliability. Reliability indicates if a test measures consistently. Thus in test/retest reliability, a student should receive the same/similar test scores if the test is taken two times. If the differences are great in test scores between the two testings, it is impossible to know where the learner is in achievement.

7. norm referenced tests become empirical only after statistical data is used from test scores obtained. The content in the test items is very subjective in that other subject matter learnings could be included in the test as compared to what was selected. The basics in arithmetic such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division facts are the easiest test items to select from any academic area with vital content included. Reliability should be high due to students responding the same to test items in pilot studies when test/retest reliability. Test/retest reliability should be much higher when comparing mathematical computation skills with that of social studies, literature, music, or art. The answers then to the basics in mathematics are exacting whereas there is much subjectivity in answering test items pertaining to social studies and the fine arts.

8. each multiple choice test item is unrelated to others. Thus, no clues are to be given when a learner responds to sequential items on the test.

9. responding to test items does not represent that which exists in society. In society, workers tend to be assessed in terms of how well they perform on the job, not on a test.

10. test results given in terms of percentiles provides little information on what a student needs specifically to progress sequentially in learning (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Five).

### **Portfolios and Assessment of Student Achievement**

Portfolio assessment is quite different from state mandated testing. Portfolios emphasize students individually with teacher guidance being involved in developing a portfolio. The portfolio contains artifacts of the learner's products and processes. Thus, the following may become a part of a student's portfolio:

1. written prose and poetry.

2. projects developed as they relate directly to learning opportunities in ongoing lessons and units of study.
3. a video tape stressing committee work of the student, in interacting with others.
4. cassette recordings of oral presentations.
5. snapshots of personal construction work within a specific learning activity.
6. written book reports.
7. student self evaluation reports completed at definite intervals.
8. creative, expository, and business/friendly letters in written communication.
9. digital computerized pictures of participation in pantomimes, creative dramatics, and formal dramatizations to achieve objectives in the curriculum.
10. technological skills shown in word processor use, among other needed computer/technology uses (Ediger, 2000, 22-31).

Constructionism as a philosophy of instruction as indicated in portfolio development stresses the following:

1. assessing and assisting students as the need arises in an ongoing learning experience.
2. developing a curriculum internally within the school/classroom and not by persons external to the local situation, such as standardized and criterion referenced test.writers.
3. students perceiving the interrelationship of the curriculum, such as diagnosis and remediation within an ongoing learning activity.
4. students being engaged in the curriculum, such as in portfolio development, rather than passively responding to test items written by others.
5. students receiving instantaneous feedback to class work performed rather than depending later on a single numerical result, such as a percentile, to indicate achievement on a state mandated test (Ediger, 1999, 37-46).

Portfolio methods of assessing student achievement may not last due to the following factors:

1. a voluminous portfolio is difficult to assess by qualified personnel due to numerous entries therein, as well as portfolios cannot be machine scored.
2. numerical results such as percentiles, standard deviations, and stanines, among others, do not apply to portfolio assessment. Numerical results are precise and can be published in report card form in the news media. Rubric use can provide ratings given to a portfolio, but these ratings may lack Interscorer reliability.
3. the lay public could not possibly read and assess portfolio contents due to the many portfolios involved from many students. Even

the contents of one portfolio may take considerable time to appraise. A further difficulty, for example, is to know what to look for in a good essay written by a student. But, observing state mandated test scores is quick, simple, and efficient for the reader/observer of students achievement. Thus, a single numeral is provided to refer to how well a student is doing academically. Each academic area, from the total score may be further divided to provide a numerical score based on testing to determine learner achievement.

### Conclusion

There certainly are differences in philosophy in terms of how to appraise student achievement in the public schools. Testing and the measurement movement have certainly become vogue to report student progress to the lay public. There are definite problems when using test results to reveal learner achievement. The following truly are issues here:

1. how realistic is a single numerical statistic, such as a percentile ranking, in indicating any student's progress? There is more to assessment than a statistic. Constructivism certainly does point this out clearly.
2. how are test scores related in predicting later success at the work place?
3. how does a percentile tell specifically what a student needs to do, for example, in writing an improved business letter?
4. how might test items show increased relationship to each other? In the curriculum of teaching and learning, students are to be assisted in perceiving that subject matter is integrated, not isolated entities.
5. how might testing and portfolio use be harmonized in the assessment of achievement? Should both have a legitimate role to reveal student achievement to others?

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