



How Literacy Assessments Transform Teachers' Instructional Choices: Secondary Teachers Report How They Prepare Students for State Tests

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ABSTRACT

Literacy assessments are transforming the contexts of secondary instruction. This article reports how literacy assessments are shaping the instructional choices of nine English Language Arts teachers who work in three different states in northeastern United States – New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Through interviews, the teachers reported that they are finding creative ways to not teach to the test, but most of their instructional choices are being shaped by their perceived expectations of the state exam. On a micro level, the reports documented in this article have implications for secondary literacy instruction, while simultaneously providing a stance for conversations about how teachers can reshape their perceptions of effective literacy instruction on a macro level.

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Teachers Report How They Prepare Students for State Tests

As a result of the increased accountability ascribed to the No Child Left Behind policy of 2001, teachers have changed their instructional practices to incorporate more of the content encountered on state-wide standardized assessments. In this context, teachers believe they must “teach to the test” in order to prepare students for success on the standardized test. This paper shares insights I gained through interviews with nine secondary teachers. Although teachers are conflicted about the ways they are asked to prepare students for state-wide tests, some teachers believe that they are finding creative ways to teach beyond the test while others have transformed their practice to integrate test preparation strategies into their English Language Arts curriculum.

According to the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reading and writing performances on this assessment for White, Black, and Hispanic 12th grade students have decreased since 1992 (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). Even with this overall decline, disparities between subgroups show that White and Asian Pacific Islander students continue to have significantly higher reading scores than Blacks



and Hispanics (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). Some research suggests that a possible reason for this gap is that literacy assessments administered to secondary students measure students' literacy proficiencies by how well students "write to inform, to persuade, or to retell a story" (Kern, Andre, Schilke, Barton, & McGuire, 2003, p. 816). A third possible reason, often overlooked, is that students' literacy practices are largely shaped by their experiences in school through the teachers' instructional choices. Therefore, when examining literacy practices in school a close look at the instructional choices teachers make is warranted.

Standardized Assessments Shape Literacy Expectations for Secondary Students

Statewide literacy assessments are aligned to English Language Arts Standards (NCTE and IRA, 1998). These standards advocate that reading and writing be seen as processes and that secondary school students be expected to read books from a variety of genres, produce a report for information, write persuasively, work with peers and teachers, study literature, and interpret texts. Throughout the reading process, students are expected to provide examples from their interpretation of text, make connections between texts and their personal experiences, apply what they have learned from text, and examine text critically (NCTE and IRA, 1998).

Forget, Lyle, and Reinhart-Clark, (2004) believe that adolescents perform poorly on standardized reading tests because they lack basic skills and "what is being measured in their tests is the ability of students to perform higher order thinking while they read" (Forget, Lyle, & Reinhart-Clark, 2004, p. 10), and they receive inadequate test preparation. In contrast, White, Sturtevant, and Dunlap (2003) found that "during the 1998-99 school year... teachers were modifying instruction to include activities that they believed would better prepare their students for the tests" (p. 43). Teachers in White et al.'s study reported that within their 90 minute instructional block, they do not have time to engage students in critical discussions about tests. Instead the middle school teachers who participated in their study reported that they spend their instructional time covering material that will be on the standardized test by teaching the basics through lower level questions, emphasize memorization, and test taking strategies such as how to bubble and underline. White, et al., documented that teachers use instructional time to help students practice literacy and study skills – writing specific types of essays found on the exam, practicing reading comprehension skills and strategies, practicing how to take standardized tests – that require memorization rather than what they consider higher-level or critical thinking such as comparing/ contrasting, or evaluating texts and information in their writing.

When teachers teach strategies and skills that will prepare students for state tests, standardized assessments such as the NAEP, New York State English Language Arts exam (ELA), and the newly revised Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are defining the literacy expectations for adolescents in secondary classrooms. For example, the academic tasks found on standardized assessments require that "students ... read and



write across a wide variety of disciplines, genres, and materials with increasing skill, flexibility, and insight” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2003, p. 5). As students interact with texts encountered on standardized tests, they are expected to apply content area knowledge and use various reading strategies for comprehension. A closer look at the New York State English Language Arts Test reveals that students’ literacy proficiencies are measured via their ability to:

1. listen to a passage and take notes about what they hear
2. discern important information from erroneous information in the selection
3. make inferences about what they hear in the passage
4. synthesize information obtained from the text
5. make connections between texts from different genres, namely the quote and the listening passages, which were articles in this instance
6. answer questions based on the notes taken during the listening section
7. respond to a writing prompt
8. produce a descriptive narrative
9. answer reading comprehension questions based on fiction, non-fiction, and poetry texts
10. complete graphic organizers that identify character traits
11. respond to short answer questions in which they cite evidence from the text to support their assertions
12. plan and then write an essay using a writing prompt
13. demonstrate knowledge of several writing strategies that goes beyond knowledge of the genre through use of such writing strategies as tone, appropriate word choice, and quotation marks
14. demonstrate their knowledge of the pragmatic uses of language and literacy through their ability to communicate to a wider audience

As a result of these expectations teachers struggle to transform their practices and find ways to help students succeed on standardized tests which evaluate students’ performance in these areas. If tests are aligned to standards and the standards are supposedly guiding classroom instruction, why do many students fail to meet proficiency levels on the standardized assessments year after year?

Teachers Frequently Adjust Their Curriculum to Prepare Students for Statewide Exams

I recently interviewed four high school and five middle school English Language Arts teachers who work in three states – New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts – and who teach students in grades 5 through 12. The average experience for the teachers is 6.7 years. Each was asked to provide a pseudonym to protect their identity. Each interview was conducted separately. Most of the teachers characterized their schools as large urban schools where most of the students are African American and Hispanic, from low socio-economic backgrounds, and who receive free or reduced lunch. I asked all teachers to



bring authentic artifacts from their classrooms (e.g., lesson plans, student work, instructional materials), which would help to document the practices they shared during the 2 hour interview.

I learned that all of the teachers integrated test preparation into their secondary English/Language Arts classes but they did so by incorporating test preparation with English content instruction. Although their respective state exams occur at different times of the year (see Table 1), most teachers reported that they used a combination of strategies in which they taught students skills and strategies for reading and writing, as well as test-taking skills, and periodically exposed students to the standardized tests' expectations.

Table 1

Grade Level and Month of the Year When Standardized Testing Occurs for Secondary English/Language Arts Teachers in the Study

State	Grade(s)	Month	
		Middle School	High School
Massachusetts	8, 10	May	May
New Jersey	8, 11	March	October* and March
New York	8, 11	January	January and June

Note. *Students who were retained take this administration of the exam.

Although there were only a few teachers who reported that test preparation is a school-wide initiative in their school, the teachers were asked to change their instructional practices to reflect school-wide expectations for test preparation. For example, Ms. Smith, who teaches in a school with grades 9 through 12 reported that once per week she had to prepare students for the GEPA (Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment) or the HSPA (High School Proficiency Assessment)--the standardized exams in New Jersey. She reported that her school had assigned a HSPA/GEPA instructor to help teachers prepare students for the standardized exam. Ms. Smith said, "it's her job to come into every classroom and teachers teach with her." Ms. Smith indicated that the HSPA/GEPA instructor also "gives . . . her lesson plans" to prepare her students for the standardized test.

Other teachers did not indicate that test preparation was a school-wide initiative, but suggested that they felt "pressured" to get students to pass the state test. One 8th grade teacher, Ms. Tony, reported that leading up to the test she incorporated test preparation into her curriculum daily. Ms. Tony reported that prior to the exam students were not provided with options in her classroom because she focused only on preparing for the test. She indicated that after the test students had more options in her classroom. Because she is an 8th grade teacher, Ms. Tony shared that she placed more emphasis on



writing than reading, and had specific expectations for students' writing. During the interview, Ms. Tony shared many model essays with me which she had created for the students. She described her test preparation instruction:

I focused a lot on, and I had specific requirements for them with essays. They had to have 5 paragraphs and as far as the paragraphs were concerned the paragraphs had to have no less than 5 sentences. They had to begin with an engaging statement so that the reader would be interested. The moment somebody starts reading your essay, that first sentence needs to be something engaging, something to interest them. And I was very, very hard and strict on them about that. That their essays had to follow that format, that they had to have a proper conclusion, that concluded their whole. That was something that I stressed and I really didn't give them room to do anything other than that.

Teachers also reported using on-going assessment to determine what to teach and re-teach. Most teachers (6 of the 9) reported that they used student work as on-going assessments to determine what to teach students in preparation for tests. Most teachers also shared that they periodically reviewed student outcomes on practice tests to determine what to teach. For example, as a 7th grade teacher Ms. Smart reflected on her experiences teaching 8th grade the year before. She indicated that throughout the year she identified students' strengths and weaknesses and then had them practice strategies they would need for the standardized exam so "there are no surprises" on test day. She stated:

When I had 8th grade last year, it was totally different because one, their assessment is in almost in the beginning of the year-- January. And there's no time to waste. I pretty much had to assess where they were with their reading and writing abilities. see where they were, then build from there. And then I base my instruction on that. For example, my students could not write in paragraphs, so here I go again, go back to a 4th grade lesson. How to write a paragraph, how to be clear and concise, how to engage the reader. It depends on where the students are.

Ms. Smart indicated that she used formative assessments in reading and writing to identify what to teach based on students' needs, but those needs were determined by expectations she knew would be on the state test. Some teachers reported that they used technology tools in their school to obtain information about students' proficiencies and weaknesses on assessments. For example, Ms. Smith reported:



I'm able to go online and the students are as well, and they can all sit with their laptops in the room and take a practice reading test or practice writing test. I can go right on the computer, click on their name, it'll come up, it'll be scored for me.

Ms. Smith indicated that all the teachers in her school are expected to use the information to provide focused instruction based on the students' needs as they relate to expectations on the test. Like Ms. Smart, Ms. Smith reported that she used student results from the practice tests to guide instruction in reading and writing, so that she can prepare students for the standardized assessment.

The teachers reported that they made specific curricular adjustments by keeping the timeline and content expectations for the state test in mind. For instance, Ms. Smart, a middle school teacher from New York, reported that her program for literacy instruction had been modified because the grade 8 writing assessment occurs towards the middle of the school year, so she makes adjustments to the curriculum content in order to prepare them in time for the test. Additionally, Table 2 shows that Ms. Smart taught her students reading and writing strategies, and note taking (see Table 2). However, because she was guided by the state exam for each grade Ms. Smart's instructional choices were slightly different in each context.

Table 2

Comparison of 7th and 8th Grade Test Preparation Activities Emphasized, Reported by Ms Smart

Test Preparation Activities Emphasized	Grade 7	Grade 8
Practice taking multiple choice test	√	
Practice using reading strategies	√	√
Practice using writing strategies/techniques across genre/craft		√
Using on-going assessments to guide instruction	√	√
Practice listening and note taking skills	√*	√
Vocabulary instruction	√	

Note. *Ms. Smart emphasized note taking in her 7th grade class because she was aware that it is an expectation on the grade 8 exam.

Ms. Smart's 8th grade class received more writing preparation, while the 7th grade students had more practice in taking multiple-choice tests and vocabulary instruction. Ms. Smart indicated that incorporating these activities through "strategic teaching" helped prepare students for the reading assessment and helped improve their reading and writing skills. Ms. Smart suggests that "strategic teaching," requires that she teach students strategies in reading and writing to prepare for tests. She explained



You can tell the difference in their reading and their writing. Last year the 8th graders that I had in my classroom totally moved, I mean in 5 months. With some real strategic teaching their reading habits changed. They changed as writers.

Middle and High School Teachers Show Subtle Differences in Addressing Test Preparation

Both middle and high school teachers taught students how to make connections between texts, taught students how to understand literary elements of texts, daily test preparation, identifying themes, and provided students with practice exams. Despite the overwhelming similarities in the test preparation activities it appears that the middle school teachers placed more emphasis on teaching their students strategies for reading and writing (see Table 3). In addition, the middle school teachers connected reading and writing strategies by providing opportunities for students to practice using the strategies the learned while reading, in their own writing.

Middle school teachers I interviewed seemed to focus more on strategies for reading and writing, while high-school teachers emphasized extracting meaning from and interpreting texts. Some of the teachers also reported that they taught students test-taking strategies. As indicated on Table 3, teachers taught students how to answer multiple choice questions and note taking. While reviewing a chart she had created for her classroom, during her interview Ms. Bray, a 7th grade teacher said:

I have posted in the front of the room various questions, the various types of questions--what a “who” question is, what a “what” question is, a “why.” All the students, they’re familiar with the 5 Ws, but when asked as a question, they don’t really understand how to answer it. With them, answering questions on a test as well as their state exam. They’ll give you a “who” answer as opposed to a “what” question. So you know they don’t really answer the questions effectively because they don’t understand what the question is asking.

Similarly, Ms. Smart reported that she taught students how to use the process of elimination when taking multiple-choice tests. She stated:

When the test gets near we focus on the format of the test, meaning multiple choice strategies. How we can eliminate the two definitely wrong answers, [that there is] one answer that might be the answer, but we have to go back to find evidence.

Overall teachers emphasized reading and writing strategies. For example, Ms. Smart taught her middle school students reading strategies, such as making personal



connections to text and between texts, knowing how to figure out unknown words while reading, and engaging in techniques for writing across genres by using published models.

Table 3

Reading and Writing Expectations for Middle and High School Students

	Reading	Writing
Middle School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ figure out unknown words encountered while reading ▪ go back in the story for examples and evidence to support answers for multiple choice questions ▪ make comparisons between different texts by identifying the themes or literary elements encountered in the text ▪ answer different types of reading comprehension questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ use the style of your favorite author to engage the reader or write a poem ▪ use literary devices found in different published works ▪ use the writing process to generate ideas for writing and to revise your work
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ complete practice tests that mirror the state test ▪ listen and take notes ▪ practice test taking strategies daily 	
High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discuss reading passages ▪ Figure out the meaning/ theme of a poem ▪ Figure out literary elements being used by the author ▪ Talk about how reading passages are similar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Write essays
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ complete midterm and final exams use same format as the state test ▪ practice test taking strategies daily 	

Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Beyond the Test

Some teachers reported that they helped students prepare for standardized tests without directly teaching to the test. It appeared that they accomplished this by asking students to create review games and teaching skills and strategies they believe will lead to long-term literacy skills. Although some teachers thought they were teaching skills and strategies needed beyond the test, I learned that the strategies taught were shaped by the expectations on the state test.

Another interesting trend was that high school teachers reported that they asked students to create review games to prepare for standardized exams. For example, Ms. Brown asked students to create board games based on literary elements discussed in



class. She indicated that students had to look “through the chapters of books they read to find examples of different types of literary elements, so that they actually see how it’s used.” Ms. Brown provided opportunities for students to work with peers to create their own “trivia” questions as they examined literary elements encountered in books they had read. Similarly, Ms. Taylor asked students to create games that she called “English Regents Review” games. She explained:

We just went over the ELA [English Language Arts] exam, and the students had to create their own English Regents review game. They were very creative. We had “ELA Plinco.” “Who Wants to Be an English Millionaire.” Wonderful, wonderful games. Then the kids played English hopscotch.

Ms. Taylor reported that for the first time she deviated from “teaching for the test” and asked students to engage in these creative ways to review for the state test. In addition, she reported that in contrast to previous years, her students showed the most gains in literacy as measured on the standardized test because she focused less on the test and emphasized reading and writing skills. She said:

This year, for the first time, I didn’t really focus on teaching for the test. I focused on the skills that they need in order to pass not only this test, but all other exams. I made connections. On the English Regents this is what’s gonna happen. But sitting down and just prepping them for the test, I didn’t do that. I didn’t do it at all. I focused on developing their writing skills, by giving them assignments like this one, the poem, writing in a different point of view. I focused on developing their reading skills, giving them passages and letting them really analyze what they read. Of course I focused on their speaking skills, even though they don’t need that for the English Regents, but I focused on those skills, and you know what? The kids did really, really well with me just focusing on the skills that they needed, rather than saying OK we’re teaching for the test.

Although there were only a few teachers who tried incorporating creative activities to help students review for the state test and emphasized reading and writing skills in their English Language Arts classroom, all of the teachers reported common frustrations about the standardized assessments. As previously mentioned many teachers indicated that they felt “pressure” from the state assessment, and, in some instances, they reported that they made instructional choices that caused them to feel they were teaching towards a test. For example, Ms. Doe facetiously admitted that she is required to do “MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] prep 99 percent of the time.



So it's not fun." Ms. Bray's comments sum up the conflict shared by most teachers in the study:

Preparing for test prep, and then towards the end of the year, I'm more preparing them for the next grade--what they would need to be in the 8th grade or be an 8th grade student. Focusing on the test, trying to stay away from teaching towards the test, but it's such an intricate part of what they are required or what they are judged by to be promoted.

The conflict faced by many teachers is that the challenge is whether to focus on what the students need beyond that class and beyond the test by trying not to teach for the test or to help students meet promotional guidelines and prepare them for the next grade."

Concluding Remarks

Through the interviews with the nine teachers and close examination of the artifacts they shared with me, it is evident that teachers are teaching to the test but many (a) are not aware they are doing so because they believe they are emphasizing skills and strategies; (b) teachers are aware they are teaching to the test and make conscious effort to integrate test preparation into the curriculum; (c) are conflicted about how the state test is impacting their English Language Arts curriculum. All teachers I interviewed reported incorporating standardized test preparation into their content instruction and all reported similar frustrations about the challenges of preparing students for standardized tests. However, the teachers who stated that they did not "teach to the test," but taught strategies for reading and writing and informed students how the strategies could be applied to the exam, reported that their students were more successful on standardized tests.

Although the teachers in this study worked in three different states, all of them made instructional choices that were shaped more by the state test. The study documented that these teachers were conflicted because they perceived a disjuncture between their curricular decisions and their stated professional beliefs. This suggests that teachers in the current study believe these conflicting practices may lead to ineffective instructional choices; thus they might feel confined by short-term pressures that inhibit their efforts toward teaching for long-term goals. White, Sturtevant, and Dunlap (2003) found that middle school teachers in their study expressed similar internal conflicts about teaching for the standardized exam. Their research found that middle-school teachers focus more on test preparation because their students demonstrate weak literacy skills that do not meet expectations for the tests so they feel obligated to abandon educational philosophies fostered in graduate school (White, Sturtevant, & Dunlap, 2003). Thus future research might examine how teachers cope with the contradictions between their teaching beliefs and their actual teaching practices.

It is important to note that when teachers changed their instructional focus to what they believed supported the long-term literacy development of their students, they reported that their students performed better on standardized tests than when they tried to



“teach to the test” through isolated test-taking strategies and short-term test preparation. The teachers believe that their students were able to apply what they learned in English/Language Arts to different contexts, transfer skills to different activities, and use their literacy skills in more meaningful ways.

Teachers should spend more time reflecting on their practice and why they are making the instructional choices they do. Through critical reflection teachers will see that their perceptions of not “teaching to the test” closely mirror practices that explicitly integrate test preparation into their curriculum. The teachers herein, believe that they have changed their practice to teach students strategies and skills they will need to succeed beyond the test, however they fail to see that standardized tests have transformed their curriculum to the point where secondary English Language Arts content reflects content on the standardized assessment.

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