Accountability the Individual Way

by Sarah Vyrostek

Purpose

Rather than regard frequent and subjective testing as a negative, it should prove more beneficial for educators to offer students an opportunity to acquire life skills that will carry them through any test-taking situation. Offering students the skills necessary to succeed not only in the classroom but also through testing is where accountability begins. This paper proposes attaining accountability both in the classroom and on standardized assessments.

Author's Position

Standardized testing, a part of the educational system for decades, has become an important research issue with the growing emphasis on testing success and the student skills required to consider tests appropriate (Klein, Zevenbergen, and Brown 2006). The same lack of accountability in educational systems that originally led to passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB 2002) still exists in many states.

Some might consider the standardized testing required by NCLB "punishment." Standardized testing, though, is not what has caused the uproar among educators; rather, it is the level of accountability mandated by the law. Educators uncomfortable with NCLB need to realize, nevertheless, that frequent testing is the reality.

The controversy over education reform has many fingers pointing: the federal government points at the state, the state at school districts, the school districts at individual schools, and finally individual schools at teachers. Williams (2005) describes teacher accountability by stating:

> [W]e teachers have a responsibility to assess whether students are learning the concepts, ideas, and ways of thinking

that we believe are important and also to hold ourselves and our pedagogies accountable if we are failing to reach most of our students. (p. 152)

Implications

The prominence of testing in every student's life, however, does not necessarily mean that students are learning the skills necessary to succeed on these tests.

The movement toward mandatory testing did not begin with NCLB. It was the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 that "informed American citizens that students were performing substantially below students in other countries in literacy and numeracy-based activities" (Klein, Zevenbergen, and Brown 2006, p. 147). Klein, Zevenbergen, and Brown observe that with the passage of Goals 2000 in 1994, "a federal plan was devised to delineate educational standards for each state" (p. 147). Each state would be held accountable to the standards and the educational improvement of each school through standardized assessment (Klein, Zevenbergen, and Brown 2006).

The data that were and still are being collected as a result of standardized testing were and still are made public. The effect of *A Nation at Risk* was increased testing, and Goals 2000 and NCLB also allowed parents more say. Hirsch (2007) explains that under NCLB, "In order to receive full benefits from the federal government, schools are required to show adequate yearly progress [AYP] on reading tests for all social groups" (p. 97). If a school does not meet adequate yearly progress, parents have the right to transfer their child to a school that is meeting AYP targets.
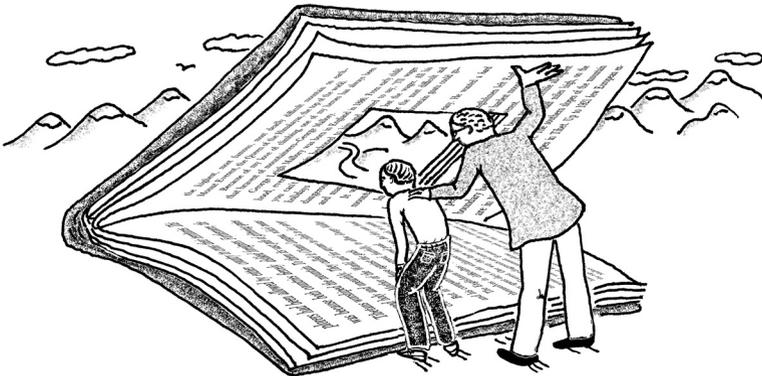
Standardized Testing

State standards and their accompanying accountability altered standardized tests' frequency and design (Klein, Zevenbergen, and Brown 2006, p. 146). To meet the standards, tests had to measure each student's understanding of the standards (Klein, Zevenbergen, and Brown 2006). The standardized testing regime was created not to make more work for teachers but to act as another element of checks and balances, to hold teachers accountable to their students for teaching the skills that maximize curriculum-based instruction. When teachers are accountable for their students' learning, the test-taking data will show that accountability.

There will always be a question of subjectivity when the government decides which standards should be met at certain grade levels and forces students to participate in testing procedures that test those specific standards. The subjectivity of a particular standardized test can undermine its reliability and validity. As a result, standardized tests must contain a variety of passages that cover a general knowledge base (Hirsch 2007)—yet many standardized tests fail to do so. Hirsch continues, "Their [standardized tests'] two most damaging flaws are, first, they do not positively influence instruction, since they are unrelated to any content curriculum, and second, that they cannot accurately measure yearly progress" (p. 106).

Many and Jakicic (2006) agree with Hirsch: "Annual exams did not offer timely information and weren't linked to the local curriculum" (p. 46). Standardized tests are often given at the end of a school year, usually in the spring, and results are unavailable until the students have progressed to the next grade. How do the data from these tests help teachers meet the precise needs of each student if the test scores aren't available until the following school year? It would be in the best interest of all teachers to assess their students regularly to meet students' individual needs before the end-of-the-year assessment. Wolf's (2007) work describes the importance of regular assessment:

> The regular assessment of students serves critical educational and life-learning functions. It focuses the efforts of educators and students on mastering important material. Testing provides educators with crucial intelligence about the needs and abilities of students and the performance of academic programs. Regular assessment provides students and parents with useful feedback regarding how well the student is building important skills and knowledge. (p. 690)

Therein lies the issue of "teaching to the test." Teachers fear their schools' accreditation, as well as their jobs, may be at stake, so they are tempted to teach only directly test-related material. Botzakis (2004) states, "When so much emphasis is placed on testing, the result is that it overshadows everything else, and the focus of education is lost. . . . Children wouldn't so much be taught to learn as they would be taught to pass a test" (p. 10).

Most tests can be placed into one of two categories: diagnostic or accountability (Wolf 2007). Diagnostic tests can consist of quizzes, final exams, and other informal assessments (Wolf 2007). Wolf describes accountability assessments as those that "literally force someone or something to account for outcomes. Accountability assessments vary primarily based on who or what risks sanctions as a result of the testing—state governments, school districts, schools, teachers, or individual students" (p. 692).

Recognizing the demand for consistent testing and timely data, many school districts use their teachers' expertise to create district-common assessments that meet the curriculum as well as offer data that help teachers quickly make adjustments to their teaching. Often the common assessments use questions, language, and directions similar to those of standardized tests. District-common assessments make all grade levels accountable for teaching to standards. Granted, district-common assessments are analyzed only by the school district, but the data can help ensure that all teachers are accountable to all students. No longer need teachers fear being placed in grades in which tests are scheduled, because tests administered at all grade levels can spotlight many concerns beforehand.

Besides district-common assessments, teachers have several other means of assessing their students' learning without the data being broadcast across the school district. Such informal assessments—quizzes, unit tests, and essays—have been in place in classrooms for many years. They require teachers to use their own resources and references to create content-appropriate assessments to measure student growth (Many and Jakicic 2006).

Reciprocal Teaching

Assessments aside, the crux of education is students' acquisition of skills that will help guide them through all learning situations. Williams (2005) states the importance of remembering the basics of education:

> In the drive to assess and quantify, what is forgotten is why we want students to read and write in the first place. Reading

and writing is about communicating with other human beings—about being part of a society and its ongoing conversations. (p. 154)

Many students have not successfully acquired critical and analytic skills in reading (Ash 2005). Many students fail to read well or just do not like to read, and others read only when they are told to or even not at all (Scherer 2005). A need exists for a more-concentrated program focused on reading for meaning and comprehension. Such reading can help students succeed not only in the classroom but also as lifelong learners.

Darwin and Fleischman (2005) found that struggling readers focus primarily on word recognition. Reading instruction often fails to address two skills needed for successful comprehension: vocabulary building and background knowledge of the reading. One means of providing such skills is Reciprocal Teaching. To meet the needs of all students on all levels of understanding, Reciprocal Teaching allows teachers to facilitate a learning environment in which students help students as participants in a community of learners respecting each other as learners (Ayers 2006).

Hapgood and Palincsar (2006/2007) report that students have the ability to tap into their own environmental knowledge—that is, their knowledge of the immediate environment that contributes to understanding the larger world. Reciprocal Teaching enables students to access their world knowledge and find common ground in their reading. In small groups, students can share with one another how they connect to the text, and their connections cannot be dismissed out of hand because it is *their* connections that activate *their* deeper understanding. Carter (1997) says: "Using prior experiences as a channel, readers learn new information, main ideas, and arguments. Most important, readers construct meaning from the text by relying on prior experience to parallel, contrast, or affirm what the author suggests" (p. 66).

Along with the foundation of students helping to teach students, Reciprocal Teaching focuses on assigning "jobs" to each student within the small groups. These "jobs" allow each student to fulfill roles as questioners, summarizers, clarifiers, and predictors throughout the text shared within the group (Oczkus 2003). When first introducing Reciprocal Teaching to students, the teacher models each of the four roles. The modeling may take the students several days along with participation and practice to grasp each of the four roles fully (Ash 2005).

According to Tovani (2005), students often feel more comfortable expressing their misunderstandings when they are among peers.

In Reciprocal Teaching, students can demonstrate the accountability that the group expects (Tovani 2005). Through modeling, students gain knowledge of the four roles, each of which gives students a purpose when following along in a text. Tovani (2005) explains that students can then organize the information they are taking in and occupy themselves with activities more complex than reading individual words or staring into space.

Reciprocal Teaching benefits many students from various ability groups. The strategy offers teachers "skill in assessing the needs of individual students" (Scherer 2004, p. 5). Reciprocal Teaching begins with the teacher. Students look to the teacher as the model to guide them to deeper levels of comprehension. The teacher leads by example. Students using Reciprocal Teaching in the classroom receive the "independent practice, reflection on their practice, feedback from others, and ongoing strategy used to move beyond literal and inferential reading comprehension and to achieve the advanced literacy skills needed in the twenty-first century" (Ash 2005, p. 40).

Nothing prepares teachers better than direct classroom experience. It is in the classroom that a new teacher can learn to become an experienced and respected teacher with accountability: no books or teacher education classes can teach that. Within the classroom, teachers can build relationships with each student that will also build trust between what is being taught and what is being learned. When teachers value student relationships, the students will respond. Teachers can take student learning beyond the required standards and also build personal connections to content that can create success within the classroom as well as on assessments. When teachers take the initiative, real, effective accountability can be established.

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