Meier, Deborah (1973) The Fatal Defects of Reading Tests, In C. Silberman , The Open Classroom Reader. Random House, (pp. 587-598)

published form.

4. The Fatal Defects of Reading Tests

Standardized reading tests do a grave disservice to both children and teachers because they subject both to a system of evaluation based on standards and goals that ignore, and in many instances do violence to, the ways in which young children learn. This indictment of the Metro-

politan Achievement Test, one of the most widely used tests of reading, is valuable for its author's point of view about reading and its insights into the ways in which children think. Deborah Meier is a staff member of the City College Advisory Service to Open Corridors.

The reading test mystique is, despite the number and respectability of its opponents, decidedly more widespread and powerful than ever before. Faced with a growing demand for "accountability," school administrators increasingly tend to exploit testing as a cheap and easy way of defining goals as well as of measuring success.

As a result, every parent and citizen is alerted to and armed with very precise test statistics. A child is no longer "a good reader," "a poor reader," or even "a non-reader." Now Johnny is a 2.7 or a 4.1 reader. Schools, too, are consistently classified by reading test scores—above grade level or below, and almost all "performance contracting" is based upon payment according to such test score results.

The Social Context

It is not only the poor minority parent, with a history of legitimate suspicion about the good intentions of the school system, who is the "true believer" in the reading tests. It is not only 3R-conscious "middle America." The faith embraces also highly educated parents, including many advocates of open classrooms, "relevant curriculum," and free schools. At meeting after meeting, many such parents—while demanding the introduction of freer and more relevant schooling—will inquire about the comparative test scores of open vs. formal schools and use past test scores to prove the evils of traditional education. Well-educated and well-off parents have told me how they "had to" change schools or hire tutors because their 9-year-old *scored* low, or anyway insufficiently high! ("But does he read well?" I ask in vain.) Others praise John Holt and A. S. Neil as their educational gods and then tell me proudly that they have just learned that their fifth grade son is an 11.3 reader. In short, almost all parents "believe in" these tests. They "believe in" them even when the scores defy their own observations about their own child's reading ability, and despite a nearly total ignorance of test contents, scoring methods, or, certainly, their own child's actual performance on the test.

Test scores are hard to resist, given their widespread use by school systems, their utilization in reputable studies on education, their quotation in the most scholarly journals, their yearly publicity in the *New York Times,* and the passing references made to them by the best intentioned educators when boasting of their own favorite programs. (Furthermore, the statistical exactitude of the testing lingo adds to an aura of scientific accuracy.) If this is the case with parents who know their own children, and school people who presumably know their own classrooms, it is certainly understandable that the public whose taxes support the schools should accept test scores as hard data regarding the success or failure of school programs.

Yet an examination of the tests themselves, their scoring methods, and, most important, the manner in which children handle them, demonstrates that they do a grave disservice. They subject the young child to an evaluation system based on standards which neither child, parent, teacher, nor school may agree on or even be consciously aware of, and thus, often unwittingly, drive schools and teachers into adopting pressure-cooker programs to meet the needs of the tests, not children.

This combination of circumstances may account for what has become an open scandal in New York City schools: the widespread cheating done with regard to reading tests, not merely by students but by the educational establishment itself—including traditionalists, reformers, and radicals.

While teachers and administrators congratulate themselves on the fresh wind of humanism that is blowing across the nation's schools (albeit amidst an inhumane poverty of funds), they have paid too little attention to the entrenchment of a system of measurement that could serve as the excuse for the death of any reforms.

"Why such passion? What are you afraid of? Aren't such tests 'merely' a tool to measure a child's ability to read, which you also are eager to improve?" say well-intentioned colleagues. But what is reading? How do such tests measure it? And if they do not measure reading development, what is it they do? And how dangerous is their effect?

It is a cliché to note that education does not take place solely within the four walls of a school. In fact, *between* the ages of 6 and 16, children spend only about a fifth of their waking hours inside schools. But what is apparently less obvious is that it is therefore not possible to devise a standardized group test that measures only the data printed upon the mind by the school teacher.

Or, put another way, no standardized group test by its very nature can be without bias. Nor should it. It has to have a particular content of some sort. Furthermore, it has to have a style and a "jargon." It has to have a "format"—a way of getting to what it is after. And finally, it must be built in such a way that it can be "objectively" scored for right and wrong responses.

From Deborah Meier, "What's Wrong with Reading Tests?" (New York: Notes from City College Advisory Service to Open Corridors, March 1972), pp. 3–17.

The Trouble with the Tests

Two major "biases" exist in the reading tests given to young children. One that has been well publicized is the class and cultural bias regarding choice of content. As testing critics have noted, tests reward not only "the ability to read" but also knowledge of particular words, ideas, places, and experiences, commonly linked more with one socioeconomic group than another.

While one can *understand* the argument that a high school diploma (or a college degree) should indicate knowledge of a certain "common curricula territory," it is not the tester of reading who should be deciding on the territory. Furthermore, to aim for this from the primary school is absurd. Worse, it is dangerous. For the task of the teacher of the young is the very opposite one. Early childhood education seeks to emphasize words, concepts, and reading material that will help a child sort out the here and now, that will provide continuity between his preschool learning and his school learning, between the different parts of his own life and environment. It stretches out beyond the world of intimacy only slowly, as experience, interests, and needs widen.

A test that ignores the nature of childhood separates—with a tool of apparent scientific neutrality—children of one kind of background from those of another. An examination of the way children deal with the test documents this fact in a startling fashion. As one listens to bright, articulate black children from our inner city schools attempt to make sense of the bewildering array of test questions, the bias involved is painful and shocking.

The second bias, less apparent and probably more insidious because of its subtlety, is the extent to which standardized tests are rigged against the nature of the thinking of all young children. What appears to many teachers, in their effort to coach their students to success, as "immaturity" (if not stupidity) in dealing with test questions, is simply the normal developmental style of thought of any 7- or 8-year-old. Middle-class children, because of their familiarity with certain key phrases and styles (conditioned responses), short-cut the process and succeed in producing "right" answers even though they do not carry out the logical thought implied by the question. They get it "right" for the "wrong" reason. The bright lower-class child, who cannot fall back upon a lifetime of familiarity with certain language, picture or word-association patterns, is dependent upon real mental ingenuity to make the necessary "logical" connections. As a result, even if he has equal reading skill and utilizes greater intelligence in his effort to think through the particular question on the test, he is bound to answer wrong more frequently. A 7-year-old child, still engaged in "pre-operational" thinking, or, at most, in what Jean Piaget has described as "early concrete

operational thinking," is simply not in the same world as the adults who fashion such tests. It is for this reason that such a child's ingenuity and good judgment are not only useless to the task, but often even detrimental to it.

In labeling such children "slow," or seeking test-oriented get-rich-quick schemes, irreparable damage is done. Schemes to help such children "score better" (however well meant) invariably seek to substitute conditioned responses for good thinking. They block off the rich vein of associative thinking, imagery, spontaneity, and attendant self-confidence that the world makes sense upon which intellectual growth depends.

In relying on drilled associations to link specific terms or words, they divorce language from conceptual and experiental growth. They fashion their own curriculum demands which focus not on children's interests or their developmental needs but on preknowledge of the nature of the test contents. The tendency for "school thinking" to become disassociated from "sensible thinking" is thus reinforced. In short, in order to "look good" in second grade, we risk a child's potential for later growth.

To make matters worse, the scoring methods currently in vogue lead to their own absurdities. Test scores are reported by grade level norms: a second grader taking the test in April is "average" if he scores 2.7 (second year, seventh month). Towards the two ends of the scale the grade-level equivalents go wild. On one of the tests examined here, 77 out of 84 right scores 3.7, 4 more right jumps it to 5.2, and a mere 3 more catapults a student to 8.4. At the other end, average luck at guessing will place a second grader taking this test at 2.0. A few bad guesses and he zooms down to 1.3. For this reason, a poor reader is best advised to take the most advanced test he can, where, assuming he skips nothing and has average luck, he will score amazingly high in terms of grade level. The test makers admit the scoring system is misleading. They argue that it is hard to find one that will better satisfy the public.

How Children Handle Tests

Following the spring 1971 testing period in New York City, I spent two weeks talking about the tests with second and third grade children with whom I had worked for some years in a central Harlem school. All had just completed one of two tests: Primary II or Elementary I of the Metropolitan Reading Achievement tests. These tests are fairly typical, and the following comments are not intended as criticism of this particular set. For while in certain respects it has improvable qualities, this set is no worse than any others and better than some.

These tests are given to all second through fourth grade children (7- to 9-year-olds) in New York City each spring. I met with about 15

children in small group discussions and individual sessions, taping their comments so that I could review them later with other colleagues. Most of the children had had a limited period of skillful pre-test coaching, were among our best students academically, and had spent at least a year in fairly informal classrooms. These conversations led me to note at least four broad areas of competence that seemed to be involved in an ability to score high. Few of these competencies seemed necessarily connected, however, to "reading," "word knowledge," or "comprehension," the specific aims of the test.

The most startling realization was the extent of confusion in most children's minds about what they were being asked to think about or do. The test directions involved thinking skills that were inappropriate for most 7-year-olds; not only was there a poor choice of wording but also a mismatch between the test tasks and the minds of the children for whom the test was intended. For example, one part of the "word knowledge" subtest consists of simple line drawings followed by a choice of four words. The child is asked to select the one that "tells what the picture is about." Generally children had no difficulty thinking of a name for the object in question. But if that name did not work, the children were not always able to refocus in order to select the possible word association that the testmaker might have had in mind. A child in second grade looking at a drawing of a merry-go-round sought vainly for the word "merry-go-round." "The only word that begins with an 'm' is 'mile,' " she wailed. "It couldn't be right, could it?" she inquired insecurely. A few chose "run," because the horses in the picture, they said, might be running. The correct answer, incidentally, was "turn." Similarly, a few good readers were stumped by the picture of a ball! They went over and over the possible answers. Afterwards some insisted that there had been something wrong with their test! The "right answer," b-a-l-l, must certainly have been somewhere. They were unable to even consider "round" as a possible answer, although, as with "turn," most were quite able to read and use it appropriately.

Another section of the "word knowledge" subtest requires children to note the underlined word in an incomplete sentence, and then choose one of four words which "best completes the sentence." The sentences are of the type: "*Afraid* means . . ." "To *know* is to . . ." or "*Quiet* is the opposite of . . ." What the test seems to be seeking are synonyms and antonyms. But the children invented their own game of word association. A synonym is only one approach to "word definition" and involves a quite abstract notion about the replaceability of one word for another. If pressed for a "meaning," children (and adults) generally give a story example that describes the word or which uses it appropriately. When I asked what "afraid" means, children told me *when* or *why* you might be afraid, e.g., "Afraid means like when you go some-

place new and you get afraid." They often selected the right answer, "scared," to complete this sentence because it was natural for them to use it in the context of "afraid." ("I get scared when I am afraid," seemed to make sense.) However, and for precisely the same reason, the children were divided more or less equally between right and wrong answers on the sentence "to *keep* means to . . ." The four choices included "carry" and "hold." The ones who got it right said, "If you want to keep *something* you got to *hold* onto it." The others, who answered it wrong, said with equal logic, "If you want to *keep* it you better *carry* it." In both cases the children were explaining the relationship in life between two words.

For some children of 7 and 8, "opposites" were difficult and were confused in their mind with the concept of "very different." When I tried to explain the notion of opposites, I began to grasp how complex and abstract this "simple" idea was. Familiarity leads most children to the correct answers. But for some children, "tall" and "far" were opposites, just as clearly as "tall" and "short," and no reasoned argument in the world could demonstrate otherwise at this age. Their failure again was not due to an incapacity to read the right answer, but rather an inability to focus on the specific relationship involved. While this kind of data is of interest to a good teacher in assessing a child's mode of thinking and classifying, it tells us very little about his "word knowledge" and his ability to read. There might well be a statistical correlation between children who are "advanced" in such tasks and those who succeed in school and become good readers. However, if we are merely seeking a statistically predictive tool, one that will serve our purposes quite well already exists, one carefully documented in the Coleman Report, which proves that the best predictor of all is the income/educational background of a child's parents. Such statistical correlations are merely indicative of the degree to which schooling is too often made irrelevant—not proof of the extent to which schooling is used effectively. Statistical *correlations* are not always sufficient evidence as to whether or not we are in fact measuring a relevant cognitive skill.

For our purposes, what is vital to know is whether a child answers a question incorrectly because he cannot read, because the vocabulary is unfamiliar or confusing to him, or merely because he has interpreted it in accord with his own common sense, in a manner appropriate to his age and his own experience. Even his "right" answers should be scrutinized with these same kinds of questions.

A similar confusion over the meaning of the test directions plagues many children in handling the "reading comprehension" subtest. Despite persistent efforts during the pretest coaching to help children understand the relationship between the story paragraph above and the incomplete sentence tasks below, some children "refused" to grasp it.

They stubbornly insisted upon inventing answers as though the previous paragraph did not exist, selecting answers instead based on their own personal experiences, intuition, or fantasies. They did so even when I reread the paragraph aloud to them, in order to get them to check their own answers. The very connection upon which the validity of this part of the test is based failed to make sense to them.

The language and subject matter are largely inappropriate for young children. For example, "a fair day is one that is . . ." The answer is "clear." But many children quite capable of reading the four choices offered had never had any reason to connect "fair" with weather. "Fair means," they explained to me, "when a teacher doesn't be unfair," "when you go on rides, that kind of fair." Similarly, few and far between were the children who were able to give me an example of where "point" and "place" were synonyms or went together in *any* way. Other words were often unfair in a test to be used with city children—as inappropriate as landlord, subway, crosstown, apartment, junkie, or project (meaning a big apartment building) would be for rural youngsters or comfortable suburbanites. We are so unconsciously biased in the world of schools in favor of 19th Century America and suburban Westchester county, that we quite forget that some words have dropped out of urban usage. Nor can one see why a *reading* test for 7- and 8-year-olds should presume that any child's verbal, much less written, knowledge should include knowing that a "canoe" is a "kind of boat" rather than a "kind of ship," that "oats" are a "kind of grain," or that "clay" is a "kind of mud." And imagine the adult mentality that asks a 7-year-old child to select just one right answer to "A *giant* is . . ." "huge," "scary," "fierce" or "mean."

It is hardly worth belaboring the absurdity of testing reading by asking 8-year-olds to read and answer questions regarding Amazon ants, the discovery of penicillin in 1928 by an English scientist, Guy Fawkes Day and the Gunpowder Plot against the British government 350 years ago, or the contents and meaning of Egyptian religious art. It would be comparable to testing the average literate adult's reading ability by giving him passages to read from Einstein, Piaget, or an advanced trigonometry text. Thus the test *makers* seek to impose a curriculum on the primary grades—one that covers the terminology appropriate to a study of medical history, the geography of the world, and the history of Western civilization. To imagine such a curriculum actually being covered in an average school day is patently absurd; to attempt it would be educationally criminal. All good early childhood education begins with the language of the child, values his own life and experiences and emphasizes reading and writing as natural extensions of this verbal communication.

Even the narrowest skills of reading—phonetic decoding ability and the possession of a good basic sight vocabulary—are poorly measured.

Every attempt is made to "trick" readers into betraying phonetic lapses and sight-word confusions. For example, among the four choices offered alongside a drawing of a human mouth are both "mouth" and "month." A majority of our good readers selected "month" because it came first. The u-n reversal is, we know, common up until fourth grade even among many fluent readers. Reading experts almost universally urge a casual approach to such reversals unless they are also associated with other reading problems. Yet the test had a number of such pitfalls which, to be avoided, would require a cautiousness toward reading (a word-for-word vocalization) that would indicate poor reading habits. *Month* and *mouth* and *log* and *leg,* for example, are hardly likely to be confused in a real reading situation.

Despite good sight word knowledge, strong decoding skill and a substantial verbal sophistication, some children still get into serious trouble over their interpretations of pictures or stories. For example, when shown a picture of a little boy at the beach with his hand on a girl's shoulder, almost everyone interviewed selected "push" as the best answer. While many did not understand the word "wade" (which was the "right" answer), they did not change their minds even when I explained what it meant. The word "push" seemed good enough and closer to their own experience with such a situation. Similarly, every second grader and all but one of the third graders misinterpreted a picture showing birds flying above and below some trees. Those birds, they insisted, were "flying many ways." Only one boy chose the correct answer, "flying in a flock." While this indicates that many of these 7- and 8-year-olds were unfamiliar with the word "flock," it also means that most of them had an interpretation of the phrase "flying in many ways" that was different from the test maker's.

In another drawing, a boy is waving toward three boys talking together in the distance. Most children incorrectly and empathetically thought the boy by himself in the foreground was "lonely because he does not have any friends." While I found the children's answer sensible, I had spontaneously answered it "correctly" by selecting "John and some boys belong to a club." Apparently I had unconsciously responded to a small suburban-type clubhouse in the background, because afterward I had a hard time defending my answer to the children or to myself! In still another drawing, bright and imaginative Karen worked out a very skillful interpretation of a picture that stumped many children. The picture showed a man in the foreground painting a wall, and some other men in firemen's uniforms in the background carrying some small objects. "The man up front is painting," Karen explained proudly to our group. "But the answer isn't this one about painting, because how would we know he was a fireman! He hasn't a fireman hat on. So they must be talking about those men back there who are carrying things, especially see this

man in the fireman's hat and that must be stuff for putting out fires." So she selected, "The fireman has the tools for putting out a fire." She convinced most of the children, including those who had correctly answered, "The fireman is doing some painting," and others who had said, "A fireman works by himself." Her mistake was not recognizing a fireman's uniform minus the hat and/or being too suspicious of the test. The children who were right generally had not bothered to read all the answers, but had simply noticed the word "painting" in the first answer given, and on that basis alone picked the right answer. Two children engaged in a charming verbal battle over a drawing of a lady shopping. "The man weighs the fruit before Mother buys it" just didn't seem right to one girl. "Where will Mother put the fruit he's weighing, since she's already carrying one bag that is too full?" "Well," said her classmate, "she could carry two bags." Her own mother does that sometimes, and she demonstrated how it could be done. The first little girl remained dubious.

Another picture puzzled many children, who could not see the logical connection between any of the sentences and the picture. The right answer was dependent on first noticing the detail of rain streaks outside the window, connecting these streaks to the idea of a rainstorm, then linking a rainstorm to a power failure and finally, all of this to the candle on the table! In still another scene, we see a smiling well-dressed girl in raincoat and rain hat. Surely she was not going to let her books get wet, was the general consensus. She must have covered them, although it was hard to tell from the picture. Most children selected one of two wrong answers: "The rain will not hurt the books" or "Mary is taking good care of the books." I arrived at the right answer by following deviously deductive logic: if Mary had been conscientious and covered her books there would be two equally correct answers. This cannot happen on a standardized test. Therefore, "Mary's books will get wet in the rain" must be the preferred answer. Yet all three answers were equally easy to read and equally defensible as descriptions of the picture.

So convincing did I find the children's arguments in support of many of their wrong answers, that I often had to seek verification and counterarguments from other adults. One might claim that some of their explanations were too labored, too imaginative, or relied on a very limited personal experience. But in only a few of the cases would greater reading skill, no matter how we defined it, have helped this group of children avoid their mistakes.

For all these reasons it should not be surprising that the second graders scored best on the last and most obtuse reading comprehension paragraph. The topic was sound vibrations and a technical description of how they are made. I "dishonestly" told the children not to bother to read it for "understanding." Instead, I suggested they start with the

incomplete sentence tasks and go back then to find phrases that coincided with the possible answers. Almost every child, using this backward strategy, managed to get two out of four right, and many answered all four correctly. In the easier paragraphs, in other words, they were penalized precisely for having sought to comprehend what was written. As a result, for example, some children thought Bill was "handsome," rather than "kind," to teach his brother to ride a bike. (Ugly was equated with meanness, and handsome with generosity.) Several insisted Mike must have had "wise parents" rather than "courage" to learn to ride a bike. And virtually all the children capable of reading the story about the architect thought his most important tools were his "paper and pencil" rather than his "ideas."

For most 7-year-olds, who have just begun the reading process, reading is still a laborious word-for-word activity in which so much energy goes into decoding and recalling that precious little is left over for genuine comprehension of any sort. This situation is intensified when the subject and vocabulary are unfamiliar and require dealing with new ideas. For most children there are simply too many intellectual tasks to perform at one time, and the test is thus merely a huge miserable confidence-shattering experience. Yet they often did no worse, if we were able to hold them together long enough to answer every question, than those described here who have mastered the first stages of real reading and who were therefore in a position to bring their "living" intelligence into the test situation.

Conclusion

Schools can make a difference. But neither educational equality nor educational quality can be demonstrated or measured through standardized group tests for young children. The mistaken set of assumptions that underlie these tests are not merely absurd. They lead to disappointment, misplaced bitterness, understandable paranoia, frantic parents, educators, and public rushing from one educational panacea to another, and finally, despair about the utility of school reform altogether.

Learning is a complex process and much remains to be understood about it. But an evaluation system must, at the very least, take into account what has been painstakingly learned from years of careful research and observation about a child's mode of thinking, growing, and learning. To use a tool to measure a child's growth that ignores the personal, individual, and often idiosyncratic nature of a young child's language cannot help us evaluate either his language or his reading skill. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, it is essential that we demand that testing devices become the tool—and not the shaper—of our educational objectives.

Suggested Readings

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5. Learning to Find Pleasure and Excitement in Language

"Perhaps the most dramatic of all the revolutions in English teaching is in the amount and quality of children's writing," the Plowden Committee observed. "In the thirties, independent writing in the infant school and lower junior school rarely extended beyond a sentence or two and the answering of questions, and for the older children it was usually a weekly or fortnightly composition on prescribed topics . . ." Now, anything and everything a child does may provide the occasion for an essay, story, or poem. Writing is no longer a "subject" to be studied for thirty minutes a day; it is a form of communication that pervades the entire curriculum.

One of the ways in which teachers can encourage children to write, Celia Houghton writes in the first selection, is to encourage a conscious interest in words and their distinctions by communicating the excitement and pleasure that can be derived from language. She suggests a number of ways in which teachers can do this.

In the second selection, Tony Kallet describes a number of word and sentence games that children seem to enjoy and that teach them some of the structural properties of the English language.

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1. Children do two kinds of writing in school, and both are important in the educational process. About 90% of the child's writing is RECORDING; writing about social studies, science, mathematics and so on; many of the words and phrases used will be taken from books, or from notes he has taken down, rather than from his own store of words. PERSONAL writing is the child's writing about his personal experiences, impressions or imaginings. Expressive prose, and poetry is personal writing, the child using his own store of words for it.

Growth is not truly individual, is it? A child grows in relation to others, and he learns by shared experience. His interest and involvement in an experience brings a need to communicate this interest and involvement. As language is an instrument for exploring our world, the more competent a child is in use of language, the clearer is his understanding of his experiences. So it could be said that writing builds the writer, and to the degree that a child does not have language competency, something of an experience must surely be lost to him.

It is interesting to discuss how much of education should be a "putting in" (and of what?), and how much a "drawing out." A child feels—intensely—and needs help to express his feelings; personal writing is one way, expressive movement, painting, clay work, music-making are others. Each of these helps the other; the child's ability to express himself well in creative dance, for instance, will help him express himself in clay work, or creative (personal) writing. If a child cannot express his feelings with words, they do come out in other ways. Unfortunately, if he has no "legitimate" way of expressing his feelings, they will often come out in anti-social, aggressive ways.

We have all seen how a young child, in dramatic play, plays many roles, and will often act out his fears and painful experiences, so that familiarity makes them more bearable; the writing child will also play many roles, some necessary for him to come to terms with a hurt, to accept it and so make it less painful.

In building a child's competency in personal writing, we are looking for opportunities to give him direct sensory experiences; first-hand experiences in which he can become interested and involved, which he will feel a *need* to communicate; and we make these experiences rich for him, through making him *aware,* making his involvement intense. This

From Celia Houghton, "Curriculum Papers," The Teacher's Center at Greenwich, Greenwich, Connecticut. mimeographed.