

HOW TEACHERS SEE TESTING

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To test, or not to test: that is the question. . . .

THIS parody on an oft-quoted passage from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seems appropriate at a time when testing practices in schools are viewed with favor on the one hand and disfavor on the other. Quite obviously, teachers are caught in the middle of the controversy. How do they feel about the testing situation? How do teachers look upon tests?

Last June an attempt was made to find out by letting some teachers speak for themselves. Their feelings about tests were sought in an opinion survey in which 300 elementary and secondary classroom teachers scattered in many parts of Florida were asked to participate. Some reacted to an opinionnaire while others—25 of them—were queried in spontaneous telephone interviews. Principals in 65 schools assisted in the process by distributing to four or five teachers in their schools copies of the opinionnaire which were sent directly to them.

The survey was aimed toward eliciting answers to four questions based on the testing movement in schools. The teachers were asked to give full comments on their reactions rather than the simple "yes" or "no" response.

Schools were selected on a random sampling basis without regard to race, school size or any other factor. Returns from the survey were received from 210, or 70 percent, of the teachers. Coupled with the telephone calls, the overall responses rose to 230, or 76 percent, of the teachers in the survey.

The Teachers Speak

The first question put to the teachers was this: "*What do you believe to be the value of standardized tests in the evaluation of teaching and learning?*"

The chief value listed in 70 percent of the responses falls in the category of identifying strengths and weaknesses in the achievement of students. This sample comment reflects the thinking of many of the teachers:

"Scores from a series of properly administered tests constitute one of the many aids in identifying students with outstanding academic talents; in ascertaining achievement and ability levels; and in planning a curriculum consistent with the achievement and ability levels identified."

Some look upon tests as a "motivating force for both teaching and learning." They believe tests to be "much like a shot in the arm."

There are still others, however, who are not sold on tests and see little or no value derived from them. They criticize in particular the inadequacy of a test to measure what it is designed to measure and its limitations in a comprehensive evaluation. They made comments, such as these:

"I.Q. tests do not measure the real ability of disadvantaged children."

"Since tests are not culture-free they are not fair to all children."

"Test items include words that are not in the experience of children from an impoverished background."

There appears to be, among the teachers, a general awareness of the limitations of tests. Many of them indicated a need for supplementary measures to fill the gap, for "there is much learning taking place which standardized tests cannot measure."

When asked, "*Is there a kind of worship of tests as the final word in the teaching-learning process?*" the respondents were almost unanimous in responding "yes." They believe that in many instances tests are the "final word" in pupil placement, grouping, and in judging pupil potential. Some commented:

"We tend to rely solely on tests to measure individual growth in reference to group or national norms."

"Tests are worshipped like demigods . . . with grave injustices to children."

Several teachers observed in almost the same vein that when schools engage in heavy testing the major goal becomes "Pass the test" or "Make high scores."

One of the respondents reported that in his county, where "before" and "after" achievement tests are administered, every teacher is expected to "bring his pupils up to a certain level" by year's end, regardless of the "multiplicity of factors involved, such as, language difficulties, cultural background, and lack of motivation." This means, according to the report, that between tests some teachers spend countless hours "teaching to the test" with little time for children "to explore, talk about things, experiment with science," or in other words "make the classroom come alive." "But," he added, "in a situation like this what else can a teacher do? It's just plain human nature."

Many of the teachers concurred that in some classrooms all other learnings seem to be secondary to "passing the test."

The third question struck a personal note. It was: "*Does overemphasis upon testing tend to affect the mental health and/or personality adjustment of teachers?*"

Eighty-four percent said "yes." Two percent believe it unlikely that well-adjusted teachers are affected by overemphasis on tests, nor do they believe that the average school overuses tests. Five percent see themselves "terribly" affected by "extra work which tests produce; sleepless nights hand scoring tests; and recording results which are never used." Many of them are affected under these conditions:

"When teachers have a feeling that their success or failure depends on test results; when tests are used for rating purposes; when test results are set up on a comparative basis according to schools and grades, mimeographed, and distributed to all schools in the county; when test scores seem to indicate which teacher is the master teacher; when 'precious time' is taken from teaching to administer, score and record test results."

The final question, "*Does overuse of testing of a mechanical nature create an atmosphere of competitiveness in the school?*" produced unusual responses. Fourteen percent of the teachers left blank spaces on the opinionnaire; nine percent responded "I don't know" or "Not in our school"; forty-seven percent gave affirmative responses but mostly, "Yes, definitely," "Yes, in many cases," and "Yes"; and thirty percent answered a flat "No" with few if any comments.

From the handful of negative comments the consensus seems to be that "We live in a competitive society . . . a spirit of competitiveness, if not carried too far, is desirable. It serves as a stimulant."

Are Tests Here To Stay?

The teachers say they are. Despite the critical views revealed in the survey, none of the teachers indicated that they would like to see a complete abolishment of all tests. In general, they believe tests are needed. Many of them expressed the opinion that they could not "envision a school devoid of some kind of objective measure." Some see many values which might be derived from tests. But above all, they see the need for "many improvements in the entire testing structure if tests are to serve as a useful tool in school evaluation."

The teachers also see the need for making use of a wide variety of evaluation instruments, formal and informal, including "social sensitivity scales, sociometrics, personality inventory," and the like. One of the teachers pointed up that "No evaluation is complete without consideration being given to facets of child growth other than the facts which he has memorized." ❧



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