

The Principal

JOANNE YATVIN

Playing the Testing Game

When I heard last spring that our school district would adopt a new set of achievement tests, I was elated. At last we would get tests that matched our curriculum and measured accurately what students had learned. But when our school representatives returned from their first test review session, declaring that none of the proposed tests was any better than the old one, I suspected that my hopes might not be realized in this lifetime.

Although some of the teacher reaction could be attributed to change anxiety and some to naiveté about the nature of standardized tests, not all their complaints could be so easily dismissed. In their view, no test fit our curriculum in content, emphasis, or style. Test directions were shot through with ambiguity and unfamiliar terminology. Formats seemed deliberately confusing. And, worst of all, psychologically the tests were aimed at adults, not children. Looking through the tests myself, I found that I agreed with most of the teachers' points. If something was being tested, it was not our district curriculum; if something was being measured, it was not our students' learning.

Whatever the experts say about the knowledge and care that go into the creation of standardized tests, it is clear to most school people that the results are seriously flawed. This is hardly surprising since the test makers face at least two insurmountable obstacles: (1) what each school teaches is different from what any other school teaches; and (2) ways of teaching and learning cannot be reproduced on a machine-scored test.

We saw those truths exemplified in many large and small ways. All the tests under consideration include fractions at fifth grade; our curriculum emphasizes them at sixth. At the heart of our science program are observation, recording data, making hypothe-

ses, and drawing conclusions; the tests care only for facts. In our reading program, we think it is important for students to predict, summarize, and interpret; none of those skills is tested. Again, in math, we emphasize estimating, approximating, identifying the elements of a problem, and translating real problem situations into mathematical statements. But the "problems" on the tests are no more than mathematical operations thinly clothed in words.

The task of finding one test format that is appropriate for students everywhere may be impossible, too. In our school—as in many others—multiple choice testing is a rarity. Students show what they've learned through writing, discussion, oral reports, and projects. I'm sure that teachers never ask them to spot minute differences in similarly worded statements or to consider if the best choice might be "none of the above." But even where students are used to multiple choice tests, they can have trouble matching hundreds of tiny spaces on the answer sheet to the right questions and continually shifting their attention from one kind of task to another.

A more serious problem for students in schools where thinking is considered an important skill is the tests' insistence on one right answer. When a school's philosophy asserts that there are often several acceptable answers to a question, that the truth of facts can depend on the circumstances, and that facts in themselves are less important than searching for, organizing, and evaluating them, how do we expect students to react to a test that stands at the opposite pole?

Still, the greatest problem is the psychological challenge tests present to inexperienced minds. For some years the experts have acknowledged that there are strategies that not only help test takers raise scores but also make them feel more in control of

their destiny. Some of those strategies—budgeting time, making good guesses, and being aware of words that signal right or wrong answers—can be, and in some schools are, taught. But many others cannot. Even when children are told that they are not expected to know all the answers or finish the test and that they should leave the hard questions until after they've answered all the easy ones, they find such advice hard to believe, harder still to act on. How many children understand that on a standardized test you can get a lot of questions wrong and still come up with a high score?

As a long-time test monitor, I have seen ample evidence that the players are not up to the game. Too many children panic when they hit three questions in a row that they can't answer or just one that doesn't make sense. They look around wildly when the five-minute warning is given and there are still three pages to go. From that point on, regardless of their ability, they are done for.

By now my test-wise readers are laughing heartily at my ignorance. Don't I know, they wonder, that children everywhere have the same problems and that all individual difficulties wash out in the statistics? Whatever the tests' flaws, strong students will wind up with high scores and weak students with low ones. Good schools look good no matter what the test.

I guess they're right. But I'm troubled anyway. I don't want a statistical victory; I want a real one: a test that assesses what our teachers have taught and that is fair to students, both as learners and as children; results that give us some insights into the weaknesses and strengths of our curriculum and instructional practices; and scores that tell parents the truth. But that is not yet to be.

We—and I mean all American schools—are stuck with a blunt and

clumsy instrument that gives us no more than a broad-group measurement and rough individual comparisons. If we are among the lucky schools, it also gives us a pacifier for public criticism.

No matter which test our district chooses, we won't get any more than that. As one teacher said during the frustrating deliberations, "Let's choose the test that will make the fewest kids cry." Not a bad criterion, that. □

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Trends

Social Studies

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An Interdisciplinary Bicentennial Curriculum

This past summer Tarry Lindquist, an elementary school teacher in Mercer Island, and Jane Brem, a museum educator in Seattle, hosted 50 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders for an overnight stay in Seattle's Museum of Flight. Their quarters were the museum's new gallery—a huge, glass structure—that had not yet been opened to the public. So, like astronauts, the children were exploring an unknown space. And each of the 50 students came as a representative of his or her class; so, like the framers of the U.S. Constitution, their coming together was an auspicious event. Their task was to frame an intergalactic bill of rights.

The convention in the new gallery was the culmination of an extraordinary integrated curriculum unit designed by Lindquist. As local coordinator of the bicentennial celebration organization called "Today's Constitution and You," she had gathered elementary teachers from around the state at a weekend planning retreat. What had emerged was an interdisciplinary curriculum that these teachers implemented during the 1986-87 school year. Their goal was to have students simulate the decision making that occurred at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, while planning ahead for something very real: the likelihood of space colonization in

these students' lifetimes.

Assumptions. The assumptions underlying the curriculum are intriguing. For example, the colonization of near space by humans is not a vague possibility but rather a likelihood. Consequently, these students were not *pre-tending*. They were preparing and practicing. Second, students were not warranted in suggesting that the norms and values of their earthly society would transfer to space. Consequently, they had to forecast and then project themselves into a set of conditions and parameters for which their bill of rights would be appropriate. Consider these:

- Light bends differently in space than it does on earth, so the notion of eyewitness account, which is taken for granted in our present system of jurisprudence, may not transfer to civic life in space.

- As a result of prolonged breathing of pure oxygen in controlled environments, humans will likely evolve into a different species, which Lindquist calls *bomo spatialis*. These beings will likely perceive, touch, taste, react, and evaluate in ways quite different from their earthbound counterparts.

- The trend toward multicultural crews of both sexes will continue and probably predicts future populations of space colonies.

- High-density populations will be commonplace because establishing

permanent colonies in space will be so expensive.¹

Classroom activities. Working with these assumptions, the 50 classrooms that were to send representatives to the intergalactic convention had engaged in research and decision making to develop a space colony. They identified the size of their colony, its location (some are space stations, others are on moons or planets), population size and ethnic composition, climate (both controlled and uncontrolled), natural resources, and products. Moreover, they wrestled with the development of a space colony culture—political life and economic relations, food and costume, holidays and traditions. Their work took them forward to *bomo spatialis* and back to Plato's ideas of good and bad government.

After developing their colony, the settlers learned that their new government had signed an intergalactic constitution that would regulate relations among and within the 50 colonies. Further, the signing had been contingent on the framing of a bill of rights that would protect the colonies and the individuals within them against the specter of an oppressive central government and an overbearing majority. The next task for students in each colony had been to frame a draft bill of rights that their representative would take to the intergalactic event at the Museum of Flight.

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