

Why giving standardized tests to young children is 'really dumb'^[1]

Author: Berliner, David (guest writer)

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EXCERPTS

Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman opined that science is the belief that everyone in authority is ignorant. I am a social scientist; politicians have authority; therefore, politicians are quite likely to be ignorant. Their ignorance cannot show up any clearer than in their recent desire to give tests to very young children.

Some states currently are preparing proposals to engage in another round of Race to the Trough [otherwise known as Race to the Top]. They are seeking a share of the \$700 million federal dollars allocated for early learning in the 2011 education budget. States can get this money if they design, develop, and administer pre-kindergarten assessments and kindergarten readiness tests. Common sense and research both suggest that this is really dumb!

If any of these authorities can remember what their own children were like at ages 3, 4 and 5, they would immediately know that any assessments of children at this age are unreliable.

Distinguished developmental psychologist Samuel Meisels believes that most young children have a restricted ability to comprehend the formal, spoken instructions required for most standardized assessments, thus they fail to pick up the cues that older children use to determine what is expected of them in an assessment environment. Younger children also lack the sophistication to interpret situational cues, or written instructions.

Similarly, questions that require complex information-processing skills, such as giving differential weights to alternative choices, distinguishing recency from primacy, or responding correctly to multistep directions, may easily cause a child to give the wrong answer to a question.

In fact, what a child had for lunch, whether they could play outside that day, and whether Sarah hit Johnny or told him he could play dress up with her, has more to do with a test score than the knowledge stored in memory. Furthermore, the knowledge assessed is not exactly what might be called "critical thinking." The questions often do no more than ask the young child to correctly identify which color is green, which stick is bigger, and which one of the pictures shown is a cow!

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My own scholarship bears on this issue as well. Arizona, like some other states, tests all children at second grade, a grade below that required by the NCLB legislation. And it is not unusual for districts to test children in first grade and in Kindergarten.

When I asked Arizona State Department of Instruction and district personnel why this was done, the answer was always the same: So they could learn which children needed help and which did not. I asked if they could get that information from teachers, but I was told that such information would not be "objective," that teacher ratings were "untrustworthy."

The state and district administrators I talked with believed that professional teachers did not and could not know enough about the skills and abilities of their students, even after spending eight months with them. I thought they were wrong. So in a series of studies with colleagues Annapurna Ganesh, Joseph Riley, and others, I tried to get the information the State of Arizona wanted from their testing of young children by means of an alternative. I simply asked teachers. I thought that if teachers could reliably identify children who need more help we could save time and money, as well as reduce the anxiety that teachers and students feel at assessment time.

These were simple studies. We asked classroom teachers in grades two to six to rank order the students in their classes in terms of how they would do on the state's No Child Left Behind accountability test. Following is some information obtained from only the two lowest grades.

In grade two, 36 teachers participated, with class sizes ranging from 17 to 30; in grade three, 30 teachers participated, with class sizes ranging between 22 to 32 students. The correlation coefficients of the teachers' ranking of their students' performance with the students' rank on the state test revealed only strong positive correlation coefficients. In third grade reading and mathematics teachers' ranks of their students correlated with the rank the student obtained on the test about .84, about as high as the reliability of the tests themselves. Many teachers exhibited correlations greater than .90, indicating that teachers are quite capable of providing the state with information about

who needs help and who does not in about 10 minutes, and at the savings of millions of dollars.

In second grade, we expected lower correlations because, as described above, the test scores of children at this age are less reliable. Yet we still found correlations between the teachers ranking and the child's rank on the test to be about .70 in both reading and mathematics. This correlation is probably as high as the test would correlate with itself a week later (its one week stability reliability), and at the extremes, the rankings by the teachers of the highest and lowest performing students were remarkably accurate.

These results once again indicate that if the state's interest is identifying students who need help, teachers can do this as well as the test.

Moreover, it is likely that the teachers' ranking provides more valid information about a child's performance vis a vis others since it is ordinarily based on thousands of hours of teaching experience, hundreds of hours of observation of that particular child, and interviews with parents and guardians, rather than based on just a few hundred minutes of standardized testing.

To compound the irony, even when the State of Arizona identified through its testing program the young children who appeared to need help, little or no help was given because there were no funds to do so.

Testing young children may be cruel, has not worked out well in the past, often provides unreliable scores and therefore invalid inferences about the abilities of children are made too often. Potentially more valid information, at least as reliable as the tests themselves, and unlikely to elicit anxiety on the part of teachers or students can be obtained from professional educators much quicker and for drastically less money. The funds saved, of course, in any sane world would be used to help the children that teachers identify as needing help.

We certainly do not need more formal testing of young children, but I do think we need sanity tests for those in authority who deny the experiences they have had with their own or other peoples' children.

- reprinted from the Washington Post

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