

DIAGNOSIS OF READING PROBLEMS: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?
ISSUES RELATED TO LABELS

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Otto suggests that the real issues concerning formal testing are the folkways and forces that perpetuate use of the tests. I will focus in this paper on some of these forces and folkways. Specifically, the purpose of the paper is to suggest that common practices associated with the use of test scores have serious consequences on the lives of students. Perhaps, as Otto claims, teachers may not use test scores to make instructional decisions. Nevertheless, the educational system does. The scores are used to label students according to the cognitive characteristics supposedly measured by the tests, and, thereby, to assign them to particular programs of study (Leinhardt, Bickel, & Palley, 1982). Moreover, government officials then use the scores and classification schemes to allocate money for the special treatments the students are supposed to receive. These programs and the labels associated with them, not the test scores, may influence the cognitive skills and knowledge students acquire as well as the type of instruction they receive.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section I review briefly some of the forces and folkways associated with formal testing in American schools. Next, I review funding policies that perpetuate use of test scores and labels to classify students into special groups. In the last section, the focus is on how labels enable teachers, administrators, and even parents to evade the social and emotional effects the labels have on students.

Testing Folkways

Standardized tests became popular at the turn of this century as a tool for evaluating the success of schools, school programs, and school systems (Resnick & Resnick, 1977, 1982, 1985). Social efficiency policies dominated school administrative practices, and formal tests appeared to provide a "scientific" basis for determining the effectiveness of schools and for assigning students to classes and programs of study. Many educators and the public bought into the illusion of scientific precision, and the notion that test scores could be efficient (i.e., psychometrically reliable) without being valid was not an issue to most people. After all, how could numbers resulting from a scientific test be inexact? An IQ score of 89 sounded precise, as did a reading level of 5.7. Moreover, at the time, it was considered only humane to identify students who might have difficulty learning in regular classes so that they could be placed in classes more suited to their intellectual capacities (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981; Matarazzo, 1972).

Some reading educators, like Gray in the 1920's and Betts in the 1930's did criticize use of standardized tests to assess reading performance (Lieber, 1971). They argued that reading ability could not be reduced to a single score and that diagnosis without the opportunity to observe a student's reading performance was invalid and that such procedures could not convey the complexity of reading levels students achieve or the sources of a student's difficulty in learning to read.

Thus, many reading educators turned to informal inventories as a means of assessing reading performance. Unfortunately, the levels established by such tests became converted into scores also, and commercial rather than teacher-made instruments came to dominate the field (cf. Jongsma & Jongsma, 1981; Powell, 1971). To compound the problem, publishers of standardized tests began to produce tests they claimed could provide diagnostic information to teachers, and use of these tests is even more pervasive in the field than that of informal inventories. Somehow reading educators became seduced by the appeal of scientific precision and administrative efficiency.

Various criticisms of testing practices in reading and standardized testing in general have been published throughout the years. Unfortunately, many of these criticisms, especially those aimed at standardized tests, are off target. It is the users of test results not the tests that are at the center of the problem. Standardized tests were developed to provide administrators and the public with some way to gauge the success (efficiency) of schools, evaluate programs, and compare different school systems. That is, standardized tests originally were developed to monitor the performance of institutions, rather than assess or guide the learning of individuals (Resnick & Resnick, 1985).

Moreover, standardized tests, even those purporting to be diagnostic, are deliberately constructed so that they are not tied to a specific curriculum. This is done both to afford comparisons among schools and to ensure the commercial success of the test. Thus, the results of standardized and commercial tests cannot and should not be used by teachers to shape an instructional response. If teachers feel compelled to do so, it is either because of how they were trained or because of expectations placed on them by school administrators.

Persistent use of test scores for establishing an instructional program reflects, in my opinion, a facet of the methodological superstructures or folkways that have evolved in reading education throughout the years. We perpetuate the practice by training teachers to use the scores to categorize students into groups for instructional purposes and by expecting them to learn

labels for talking about students with reading difficulties. We then train them in a diagnostic-prescriptive model which further compounds the problem. Teachers learn from us to seek simple causes of reading difficulty (e.g., skill or knowledge deficits) and to employ simple solutions (e.g., direct instruction, drill and practice).

Forces That Impel Use of Tests

Testing and labels did not arise in a social vacuum. They are tools that serve the needs of various groups in society. Three main groups served by tests and labels are professional educators, funding agencies, and publishers. Numerous labels and formal testing instruments now mark professional boundaries in education. Funding agencies use labels to allocate financial resources to schools, and publishers use them to create and advertise a commercial product. The issue that categorical labels stigmatize individual children and adolescents is far removed from the concerns of these groups.

Formal tests emerged at a time when schools faced a genuine need to cope with increased enrollments and student diversity. Some system for identifying students who required special services needed to be devised. Labels, such as "remedial reader," "learning disabled (LD)," or "educable mentally retarded (EMR)," grew out of sincere concerns about students who did not do well in school. Unfortunately, the various interest groups that evolved due to this concern have magnified testing and labelling practices.

Of particular concern is the impetus to increase use of tests and labels due to federal demands for providing and evaluating special educational services for students who need them. The labels, remedial, LD, or EMR, are categories used by both the federal and state legislatures to allocate funds to school districts (Leinhardt, et. al., 1982; Resnick & Resnick, 1982). These categories are defined on the basis of test scores, and funds are distributed in terms of the number of students who achieve scores that place them within the various categories. Increased financial aid is a powerful force behind schools continued use of tests and categorical labels. The fact that nobody really knows what these tests measure is not at issue. Money is.

In this sense, tests serve a functional need in education, and labels such as disadvantaged, LD, or EMR have an emotional appeal that can be used politically. Nevertheless, the labels are used to ascribe certain characteristics to real students, and it is up to individual educators to employ the labels responsibly. If use of labels negatively influences how students perceive themselves or how others, especially teachers, perceive them, then we need to change how we are conceptualizing individual differences in learning and how to deal with these differences.

Persistence and Evasion

I feel testing and labelling students persists in schools for several reasons. The first concerns expediency. It is easier to administer a test someone else has constructed and to follow their guidelines for interpreting the results than it is to figure such things out for ourselves. Moreover, once a student is classified as a low-achiever or remedial reader, it saves face. Working with these students bolsters the self-image of some people. They see themselves as protectors and defenders of the weak and disadvantaged. Others believe that the students truly are mentally inferior if they can't read, and the labels are just nice ways of saying the students are slow. In either case we evade responsibility to students, as the teacher or the system seems to benefit from the classification schemes not the students.

Another reason these practices persist has to do with money. Billions of dollars are allocated to school systems each year to provide remedial services to students. Schools want and need this money, and I have even seen letters which imply that parents should lie about their incomes so that a system can receive more financial aid. Publishers, of course, profit from tests and instructional materials as do the professors of education who work for them.

Nothing is inherently wrong with schools seeking to increase their financial aid or publishers wanting to make money. The point is, from my perspective, that this aspect of testing exerts a powerful motive for continuing to label students instead of restructuring how they are taught and what they are expected to learn.

Most importantly, however, I think these practices persist because of the education teachers receive in colleges and universities. Most teachers take courses in tests and measurement as well as courses related to learning and cognitive development. Theories related to assessment techniques and learning are somehow rejected by educators, or the theories are taught in such a way that teachers do not understand how to use them. The theory and methodology associated with standardized testing is clear about the proper uses and limitations of these instruments, and it is up to those who teach such courses to make sure that teachers are aware of how to use the theory and technology responsibly.

Closer to home, how we train teachers to think about and provide reading instruction must change. If we continue to teach reading theories, assessment procedures, and instructional methods as practical or putatively "scientific" truths rather than conceptual tools, then nothing will change as teachers will not learn how to apply the ideas we present. It is easier to memorize labels, techniques, and procedures than it is to struggle

with the complexity and uncertainty of how to go about teaching individuals to read. We are deluding teachers if we do not expose them to that complexity and uncertainty.

Neisser, in a recent interview, claims that the adjective "intelligence" is one of those words people develop to talk about things they do not understand very well (Goleman, 1983). So, too, are the labels developed to classify students who differ from their classmates in reading. Everyone acts like they know what reading tests measure and what labels for different readers mean; therefore, we avoid dealing with questions about the relationships among the tests and the cognitive capacities they assess as well as what and how students are taught. Once such labels as dyslexic, remedial, or learning disabled are assigned to students, almost everyone relaxes; parents, teachers, administration and the community. Everyone then has an explanation for why learning has not and does not occur. The sign of reading difficulty -- a test score and label -- becomes the signified; the predictor becomes the predicted.

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