

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

The Roles of Standardized Reading Tests in Schools

Standardized tests have a long history of being the go-to measure of student reading achievement, teacher accomplishment, and school accountability. Given this habit of history, it is predictable that a single standardized reading test score is often considered *the* indicator of student reading growth and achievement.

Yet standardized reading tests come with a host of consequences. Test scores are used to deem particular schools exemplary or substandard. From these designations, there may follow an exodus of students to for-profit charter schools or a reconstitution of the teaching corps of an entire school. Real estate prices rise and fall in relation to the neighborhood school's testing profile, as test scores are used as a proxy for school quality. Test scores teach students that they are “above average,” “average,” or “below average.”

In contrast to this power and these consequences, standardized reading tests are limited in their ability to describe students' reading needs and to inform reading instruction.

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Roles and Uses of Standardized Tests

The roles, or uses, of standardized tests can be described without endorsing them. These include assessing student achievement, comparing students, evaluating programs, creating educational policy, and determining accountability.

Assessing Student Achievement

We expect that students will further develop as literate individuals as a result of schooling. Standardized tests provide annual before (near the beginning of a school year) and after (near the end of the school year) appraisals of this student development. Tests also offer the opportunity to assess students in relation to a standard, or benchmark performance. From test results, we can infer student growth on a year-to-year basis, or degree of attainment of a reading standard. Tests can help answer the question, “How have students developed as readers?”

Comparing Students

Standardized testing yields student scores that can be compared. Across the globe, international comparisons including PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) are

used to assign scores and rankings to students' literacy achievement in different countries.

In the United States, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) yields a single score that allows for comparisons of student reading achievement across the different years of NAEP administration. NAEP test scores allow comparisons of students with different characteristics—including students' gender, ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced price lunch (a proxy for socioeconomic status), learning disabled and English learner status, type and location of school, and level of parental education. A classic NAEP comparison focuses on the achievement gap, or “how the demographic makeup of schools and school racial composition relates to achievement” (see <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/>).

Evaluating Programs

What is the relationship of literacy education programs to student learning outcomes? If students' test scores increase, we might infer that reading instruction is successful and give the reading program positive evaluation. In contrast, flat or decreasing student performance may lead to the determination that a reading program is ineffective. Because standardized reading tests focus on only two types of student outcome—cognitive strategies and skills and content area learning—using test scores to evaluate programs is restricted to these areas.

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Creating Educational Policy

Standardized reading test scores are grist for the policymaking mill. Standardized test scores are used as evidence to support policy decisions related to literacy education. Policymakers consult test scores when seeking answers to questions such as the following:

- What approach to teaching and learning reading yields the best results?
- Are efforts to eliminate achievement gaps working?
- Are the tax dollars spent on literacy education spent wisely?
- Are teachers earning their pay?

Determining Accountability

Public funds are used to support schools. They pay for teachers' and administrators' salaries, reading instruction programs,

and related school materials. Standardized reading test scores are used as accountability measures to determine if funds are well spent and if school personnel are meeting their charges. Standardized tests frequently feature in attempts to determine if, and how much, teachers and schools contribute to students' literacy development. Reading test scores are used in value-added approaches to estimating a teacher's contribution to students' reading growth.

These roles that standardized reading tests play may be interconnected, as when reading test scores are used in assessing student achievement, evaluating a reading program, and determining teacher accountability. However, there are considerable disagreements as to value of standardized tests, the roles they play, and the resources they consume.

Caveats in Using Standardized Tests

The widespread use of standardized reading tests stems from an insufficient understanding of their limitations. Standardized reading tests are of more use to those outside of classrooms than those in classrooms. Teachers and students get little useful information from these tests, although tests consume significant portions of schools' assessment budgets. To this point, standardized testing is a billion-dollar industry. Federal law requires that each student is tested in reading and math from grades 3 through 8. This means that schools incur substantial costs in buying, preparing for, administering, scoring, and reporting test results. The massive amounts of school money spent on testing means little or no money for classroom-based assessments that directly inform instruction.

Assessing Student Achievement

Standardized tests are rough estimates of student achievement. They often consist of texts and tasks that are not representative of most schools' literacy curriculum, unless the school uses a test preparation curriculum. Tests have limited ability to provide specific diagnostic information about student growth and achievement. In addition, standardized tests are most often silent in regards to the development of students' motivation and self-concept.

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Tests offer no information to determine if students have become enthusiastic about reading, if they have grown good reading habits, or if they think of themselves as readers who are successful.

Comparing Students

As noted previously, using test scores to compare students is restricted to cognitive strategies and skills and to content area knowledge gain. Tests offer no information to determine if students have become enthusiastic about reading, if they have grown good reading habits, or if they think of themselves as readers who are successful. In addition, the majority of standardized reading tests are norm-referenced. This means that a single student's test score is relative to other students' scores. A struggling student reader may earn a score that on one hand indicates impressive progress, but on the other is classified as "below average" or 42nd percentile.

Evaluating Programs

Using standardized reading test scores to evaluate a reading program may provide useful information about the degree to which students have developed reading strategies and skills. The scores may indicate that students have the ability to learn new knowledge from reading. If developing successful, lifelong readers is considered the result of only cognitive strategy and skill development, and the related ability to learn and remember content, then current standardized reading tests can be one indicator of this. However, if we want our reading instruction programs to foster readers who are (among other things) motivated and engaged, highly efficacious, independent, and metacognitive, then standardized reading tests are incapable of providing assessment information related to these important outcomes. The tests will offer only a partial evaluation of successful reading programs.

Creating Education Policy

Test scores and policymaking can be a volatile combination. Not all legislators and policymakers understand the shortcomings of reading tests. Lacking knowledge of the limitations of tests and test scores, policymakers may exclude other sources of information about reading achievement. In addition, policymakers may use standardized test scores in a contrasting manner.

A policymaker arguing that more funding is needed to address an achievement gap may use a collection of test scores from one school. Another policymaker uses the same set of test scores to argue that, in spite of current funding levels, a school is not being accountable to its students.

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Determining Accountability

Public funds are used to support schools. Standardized tests frequently feature in the role of determining how much teachers and schools contribute to students' literacy development. Various states and districts use a value-added model to try to determine schools' and teachers' true contribution to student learning, and test scores are always part of this accountability equation. The value-added approach involves comparisons of students' tests scores—prior test scores are used to predict future test scores, and the difference between a student's predicted score and actual score is attributed to the teacher. Unfortunately, the use of value-added approaches to determining accountability appears to ignore the caveats of the American Statistical Association, which urges extreme caution in this matter.

Use of standardized reading test scores in their different roles must be tempered with detailed knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate use. Too often, test scores are used to the exclusion of other valuable assessment information, including teachers' structured observations of students, appraisal of students' reading-related work, such as projects and performances, and students' responses to questions. Ignoring these potentially useful sources of assessment information can have negative effects on students, teachers, and learning to read.

Further, reading tests need to be evaluated in relation to opportunity cost. What does a school, school district, or state give up when most (or all) of a reading assessment budget is given to standardized reading tests? What of the spent resources could be given to professional development for teachers so that they might move toward expertise with formative assessment?

Five Salient Considerations to Keep in Mind

In summary, standardized reading tests can provide useful information that may contribute to students' reading growth.

Unfortunately, standardized test scores are assigned privileged status to the exclusion of other, valuable assessments, and they are overused in making important educational decisions. A different weighting of standardized tests should be a goal. A future in which standardized reading tests continue to contribute to our understanding of reading development, complemented by an array of formative classroom-based assessments, is attainable. This future will be challenging to realize, as the current assessment scene reflects the dominance of these tests, often at the expense of valuable alternatives.

So the next time you are listening to a debate on education policy or reading an account of annual test scores and the responses taken thereto, keep in mind the following five salient considerations:

1. Standardized reading tests are used with considerable frequency, although there is no research that links increased standardized testing with increased reading achievement.
2. Standardized reading tests are limited in their ability to describe students' reading achievement and reading development.
3. Standardized reading tests can be detrimental to the development of students' self-efficacy and motivation.
4. Standardized reading tests confine and constrict reading curriculum and can disrupt high-quality teaching.
5. Standardized reading tests demand significant allocation of time and money that could be otherwise used to increase students' reading achievement.

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