

MOVING BEYOND NATIONAL STANDARDS TO PROVIDE
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE
IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY
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Educational Assessment, National Standards
and Human Diversity

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The modern history of accountability in education dates back to the early 1980's with the Chief State School Officers effort's to come to agreement on a few key indicators of the quality of educational productivity in the public school sector. The focus was on reading, math, writing, and attendance. This modern history was preceded by, modest efforts at the turn of the century and slightly before mid century by some of the discipline based associations and accrediting groups to specify minimal offerings in elementary and secondary schools. These earlier efforts at standardizing the curriculum, also included efforts by the College Entrance Examination Board and the College Testing Service to standardize the process of and standards for admission to college. These efforts had important implications for educational standard setting, but explicit attention given to standards for educational achievement in the US is a late twentieth century development.

In a related effort the then US Office of Education in the mid sixties developed the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) under the leadership of the then Commissioner Francis Kepel. Professor Ralph Tyler was commissioned to provide leadership in the development of an assessment system that could enable the nation to

determine what american students know and know how to do. Although this was a major assessment effort, the determination of criteria or standards for such a system was required. NAEP has emerged as the nations principal source of information concerning the extent to which elementary and secondary schools are producing educational achievements referenced to patterns of such achievement in other nations.

In 1990, the Chancellor of the New York City public schools issued what were, perhaps, the nation's first minimum standards for elementary and secondary schools. These standards, recommended by a blue ribbon commission, were directed at levels of productivity for the schools of the city. The standards specified attendance rates, levels of school pacification, percentages of students passing specific achievement tests, and percentage of students who passed the New York State Regents' Examinations. In addition to these out comes, the standards also provided that schools were to be held to progress standards referable to students in the bottom achievement percentiles. For those students whose achievement was lowest, schools were to be required to demonstrate specified annual gains, even if the standards for achievement were not met. Individual schools were to be held accountable for meeting these standards. The report of the commission was prophetic in that it called for greater attention to be given to symmetry between student outcomes and staff/school inputs (opportunity to learn), and to the specification of the quality of course content, and to the improvement of the instruments and procedures of assessment. This work in NYC was driven by a concern for student, school and staff accountability.

The developments in New York City were followed by the movement within the council of governors of the nation's states to build a national agenda for school reform, with assessment and accountability at its center. Major initiatives were begun in the states of Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina and Vermont. Declaring himself the "Education President" George

Bush seized the education issue with his Education 2000, the enunciation of five goals for the nation's schools, and for a brief while focussed on a national educational achievement test as the center piece of his initiative. National standards and a national education test were expected to drive upward the quality of educational achievement in this country. It never became clear whether the expectation was that the standards would model and challenge schools to greater productivity, or that low results from a national test would threaten embarrassment sufficient to push schools to higher levels of achievement. What was clear is that the "Education President's" agenda for education did not include more money, only greater accountability.

Thus much of the modern accountability movement has been about the specification of expectations and standards for improvement in the educational achievement of students. Little national attention has been given to specifications for or the actual improvement of the capabilities of schools and their staffs. Almost as an anticipation that these efforts would not work, the so called choice movement emerged. The advocates of choice appear to have concluded that the public sector simply cannot serve adequately the education requirements of the society. Their solution is to privatize schooling. If their pessimism were justified, privatization is one ~~of the~~ possible solution. However, we know that excellent education can be provided through the public sector. We also know some of the problems that privatization produces for the human services. Health care is the service that comes to mind. Here we have a national capacity for quality health care which is, perhaps, unmatched in the world. Yet our delivery of such care, filtered through an essentially private system, is hardly competitive with some of the third world nations. In such a climate, it is interesting and some what discouraging that the movement toward standards should be focussed so sharply on the productivity of students and not on the quality of the system by which academic achievement is enabled.

Movement in support of higher standards, and effort directed at improved assessment have proceeded at a faster rate and with greater clarity than has concern for the provision of sufficient opportunities to learn, and the enablement of equity in educational assessment procedures. Yet any realistic examination of the demographic trends in the nation reveals that the goals of educational reform can not be achieved without real progress in the achievement of a higher degree of equity in the educational productivity of our ~~states and~~ nation. It is thus for practical as well as moral reasons that our ~~curriculum and assessment review~~ and reform must take seriously a commitment to equity.

The current debate concerning the appropriateness of a set of national standards for educational achievement in the United States has been coupled with a renewed debate concerning the utility of standardized testing, a) in the monitoring of educational progress, and b) as a basis for credentialing for a wide variety of purposes. Unfortunately, for those of us who prefer to deal with simple problems, this one is complex beyond measure. Yet the work of the national standards setting efforts can not proceed far without the serious engagement of these complex issues.

One source for this complexity is the ubiquitous distortions which flow from classism, nationalism, racism, sexism, and other forms of chauvinism in our society. These distortions have been traditionally thought to be unrelated to the processes of education and educational assessment. This is because the tendency has been to focus on the impact of racism or sexism on the persons who are the targeted victims of such communicentric biases rather than on the social processes and institutions which reflect those biases. But all of us and all segments of our society are victims or possible victims. The distortions and otherwise negative fallouts impact upon practically all that we seek to do. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our efforts to educate diverse populations effectively and to assess educational needs and outcomes in people whose life conditions, experiences and values differ from those

which have achieved hegemony in the society. It is a concern for these low status ethnic minorities and the poverty stricken in the United States that leads this writer to challenge the wisdom of the nation's assignment of priority to standards and testing in its education reform agenda.

If the purpose of the nation's attention being given to educational standards and national tests is to move the productivity of our schools toward the achievement of academic excellence in all our students, ~~including those whose status is low because of their social class or ethnicity~~, this effort is flawed. We can not reach universal academic excellence via the route of higher standards for the mastery of academic discipline based content alone. Even though I fully support universally high academic standards of achievement for all students, I do not think that the priority need is for a Madison Avenue style promotion of higher academic standards while budgetary allocations for the delivery of education services shrink. All across this land, the allocation of public funds for the education of poor and low status persons is threatened and in too many instances is actually inadequate to the needs.

I simply do not think that the primary educational need in our nation is for the promotion of higher standards. I think that most of us know what it means to be a well educated person. Just think about the current retreat from public schools by so many people who can afford to do so. Except for those who are trying to run away from Blacks and other minorities, this movement is about the search for better education. Look at what some people are willing to pay to have their children attend the "right" college. Now, even if higher standards were the correct priority, the current movement is flawed because it places its emphasis on academic achievement outcomes to the neglect of pedagogical inputs. The movement lacks symmetry in its treatment of educational inputs and achievement outcomes. I contend further that the movement may be flawed because the emphasis on discipline-based-standards for student mastery

within each of the curriculum content areas is inconsistent with our changing conceptions of the nature of knowledge and knowing; it is inconsistent with changing conceptions of the functions of teaching; it is inconsistent with changed understanding of the processes of learning; and it is inconsistent with changing technologies for assessment. Permit me to develop these points.

I contend that the problem with our schools is not that we don't know what good education is or what well educated people look like or what they should know or what they should be able to do. Sixty five years ago in the rural and segregated public schools of Goldsboro, North Carolina, Rosa Atmore, Hugh Victor Brown, Sadie Bell Grantham, Rosa Gray, Charity Hatcher, Beula Mae Perkins, Clyde Pickett, and other dedicated African American teachers, not only knew what it meant to be well educated, they also worked hard to enable most of my fellow students and me to achieve that quality of education. Before we could graduate from Dillard High School, we had to pass their version of the New York State regents examination. They knew what educated people were supposed to know and know how to do at that time.

Kenneth Clark recounts an incident that occurred some ten years later when he was lecturing in rural South Carolina, encouraging black people to fight against segregated education. Ken was reporting some of his finding concerning the negative effects of segregated public schools. He claims that he was interrupted about half way through his talk by a parent in the audience. The man said to Ken, "Professor Clark, we already know how bad they are treating us down here. We know that our children are not getting the best education. What we need from you is for you to tell us how we can get these folks to give our children the education that they and we know that our children need."

Some thirty years later, when Doxey Wilkerson was studying the aspirations held by African American parents for their children's education, he found that these parents held very high aspirations

for their children's education - Wilkerson claimed that they were "unrealistically high" - but he also reported that they did not know how to turn those high aspirations into high academic achievement. Even more serious was his finding that the longer these children stayed in the public schools of Harlem, the lower were their test scores, the more their parents' aspirations dropped and the greater these parents' frustrations became. Knowing what the standards were was not their problem. They needed and wanted adequate opportunities to learn.

Our productivity in the education of low status children is low not because teachers and parents do not know what academic standards are or should be. We do not experience high levels of school failure because we lack a system of educational assessment that can let us know where our children stand. The present system makes the status of our children very clear. It tells us that if you are Black, Hispanic, Native American and/or poor, you very likely stand considerably below those European American or Asian American students who are not poverty stricken. Low ethnic and low income status students' achievement is low, not because of the absence of better tests and higher standards, but because we do not have in place a system for the enablement of academic achievement that ensures that the great majority of our students have appropriate and sufficient supports and opportunities for the development of intellectual competence.

It is not outcome but input standards that should be the national priority as we try to reverse the disastrous levels of under achievement of our students. National and state efforts at the improvement of the quality of educational achievement will require more than higher standards for student achievement. They will require greater symmetry between the attention given to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment transactions on one hand, and the character and quality of the outcomes we expect to achieve through education on the other.

When we turn to questions of what we are to do in teaching, learning and assessment transactions with lower class, ethnic minority students, we get very confusing messages. There are many very interesting initiatives available. Some of them show some promise. However, the most frequently heard message from our federal and state governments seems to indicate that we don't know what to do except to demand that these students try harder. Another troublesome message suggests that public schools are incapable of adequately educating low status students. In a provocative work, Berliner and Biddle suggests that the crisis in education in the U.S. is a manufactured crisis. They claim as did Ron Edmonds, that the problem is not a lack of know-how but a failure of will to distribute what we know to certain segments of the population. There are places in the U.S. where education works quite well for some students. There are student populations whose achievement patterns are comparable to the best in the world. Could it be that a set of opportunity to learn and conditions of education standards, influenced by what those students get, might result in higher achievement for most of these low status students?

Obviously, the movement in support of higher standards, and effort directed at improved assessment have proceeded at a faster rate and with greater clarity than has concern for the provision of sufficient opportunities to learn, and the enablement of equity in educational assessment procedures. Yet any realistic examination of the demographic trends in the nation reveals that the goals of educational reform can not be achieved without real progress in the achievement of a higher degree of equity in the educational productivity of our nation. It is thus for practical as well as moral reasons that our curriculum and assessment reforms must take seriously a commitment to symmetry and equity.

The emphasis on standards for content mastery, framed by subject matter domains is no doubt influenced by the concern for specifying what it is that our children should know and know how to do. We have tended to approach such specification through the

disciplines within which knowledge and technique traditionally have been organized. However, contemporary conceptions of knowledge suggest that these boundaries are breaking down, and that many knowledge artifacts are more sensitive to differential contexts and idiosyncratic perspectives. Some investigators suggest that knowledge is neither best acquired nor optimally utilized for problem solving in discipline based domain-specific isolation. Increasingly we recognize the trans-disciplinary nature of the most recalcitrant, as well as, some of the most ordinary problems of human existence. I predict that the next struggle in the domain specific standards movement will be waged around decisions concerning what content and content domains can be left out. Already we hear teachers worrying about how to achieve comprehensive coverage in each of the subject matter areas. The emerging concern for "core or essential concepts" and the pursuit of deeper understanding through "less is more" strategies move us in the right direction, even though such strategies may appear to be counter intuitive. But what seems even more appropriate is the introduction of curriculum designs, standards and assessment probes that 1) combine disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge and understanding; and 2) privilege the ability to analyze and organize information, to integrate and synthesize knowledge, to interpret and synergize meanings.

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There is another set of problems inherent in a subject matter domain specific approach to standards. We continue to hear concern for the tension between local curriculum specificity ~~and state~~, and especially a national curriculum. In the struggle to protect the prerogatives of local and state education authorities, we hear all too little about the implications for education of the rapid movement toward economic, political and cultural globalization. There is something inconsistent about the concurrent talk of "world class" standards and provincial curriculum specificity. Just as is the concern for standards for achievement without concurrent attention to standards for the quality of the opportunities and resources necessary to such achievement.

Some students of pedagogy are suggesting that teaching and learning are less about the transfer of knowledge and skill and is more concerned with the development of intellect. Practitioners who approach education from a constructivist perspective argue that the development of intellect requires that learners be involved in the discovery and construction of the meanings and relationships which inform their knowledge and understanding. In both of these developing approaches to teaching and learning a heavy emphasis on the learning of specific knowledge and technique is likely to be challenging to all but the most expert of our teachers. In my own teaching, I struggle to use disciplinary and trans-disciplinary content and the substantive issues which are grounded in such content as the vehicles for strengthening the intellectual competence of my students. (I use intellectual competence to mean the ability and disposition to think, to acquire, to produce, to adapt, to transform and to utilize experience, information and technique that have been reflected upon, to solve problems.) We turn to the disciplines of the sciences in search of explanatory mechanisms. We examine the disciplines of the arts and humanities in search of possible meanings. It is through the use of critical inquiry and interpretation that my students and I to try to understand and make sense of the things that we experience. I don't need to tell any of you who have tried to do this kind of teaching, how difficult it is. And I, at least, have the advantage of not being required to teach to specific content standards for six continuous hours during each of five days per week. If Socratic inquiry and the development of intellectual competence are to be privileged in teaching and learning, I contend that domain specific discipline driven standards are dysfunctional to modern pedagogy and reenforce existing limitations in our professional teaching force.

Following developments in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Nation has embraced an academic achievement standards movement that seeks to specify what modern

students should know and know how to do. Building on this trend, the current administration has placed at the center of its education initiatives a voluntary educational assessment program. Such a program is as controversial as is the standards initiative since the testing program reflects the standards movement and the current status of assessment technology. I contend that the standards movement and the testing program are the wrong priority for the nation and that the testing program, in addition, can not serve its purpose because of limitations in the current state of assessment technology. I have discussed my reservations concerning the standards movement. I will close with a brief discussion of the problems posed for educational assessment by the facts of diversity in the populations which are to be assessed.

I choose to identify four key issues in educational assessment that flow from a concern with diversity in the characteristics of those we would test. These issues are: 1) the political economy of educational development and assessment; 2) limitations in the technical capacities of both pedagogy and the assessment of its effects; 3) the epistemological and theoretical contexts of educational measurement; and 4) the technological demands of equitable systems of educational assessment.

1. With respect to the political economy of educational assessment, access to a wide variety of human resource capital including the opportunity to learn is a condition which is essential to any consideration of equity and fairness in educational assessment. It is fool hearty to assume that advances in the technology of measurement can make up for humans' deprivation of resource capital and adequate opportunities to learn. When tests are used to inform judgements concerning levels of developed ability and potential for further development, the data from these tests are compromised if we can not assume reasonably equal access to a variety of forms of human resource capital. Among these categories of capital are:

- a. Health capital - physical developmental integrity, health and nutritional condition;
 - b. Financial capital - income and wealth, family, community and societal economic resources available for education;
 - c. Human capital - social competence, tacit knowledge and other education derived abilities as personal or family assets;
 - d. Social capital - social networks relationships, social norms, cultural styles and values;
 - e. Polity capital - societal membership, social concern, public commitment, political/economy;
 - f. Personal/psychological capital - disposition, attitudes, aspirations, efficacy, sense of power;
 - g. Institutional capital - quality of and access to educating and socializing institutions.
 - h. Pedagogical capital - opportunities to learn, and appropriate supports for academic and personal development in the family, school, and community.
- (Coleman 1986, Gordon and Meroe 1991, Miller 1995).

In another context, I have argued that the most critical problems in the relationship between population diversity and educational assessment may be in the quality of the educational experiences of persons to be tested. When educational experiences are adequate, the problems of assessment become manageable. When education is inappropriate and insufficient, nothing that we do in assessment will compensate for inadequate opportunity to develop and learn. An analysis of the political economy of education and its assessment forces the exploration of the broader dimensions of the opportunity to learn.

2) Earlier in this paper I have suggested that there may be a mis-match between what we know how to do in testing and some of the changing purposes and practices in pedagogy. Some of what we know how to do well in testing may be dysfunctional to changing

conceptions of modern pedagogy. But the limitations of assessment technology do not stop there. We are beginning to recognize that a focus on the content and form of test items may be insufficient to adequately address the limitations of the current technology. Irwin Katz, thirty years ago, called attention to differences in responses to tests which were associated with ethnic differences in examiners and examinees and between test takers. Fifteen or twenty years ago Sam Messick and colleagues were studying the negative impact on test performance of testing environments which were perceived to be hostile. In the mid 1990's Claude Steele began making headlines with his research that indicates that minority students perform differently under different cultural and ethnic related conditions of performance demand. We have not learned how to deal with these conditional correlates of human performance. Rather we continue to measure developed abilities as rarified and autonomous components as if they were simply intrinsic to the persons being assessed, and uninfluenced by context. An equity issue in educational assessment may have to do with how we factor in and accommodate to conditional and situational correlates of human performance, and how we generate in the profession and public the will to apply such knowledge to our work.

3. The epistemological and theoretical contexts of educational assessment are identified as sources of concern reflecting the need for a greater confluence of knowledge and technique flowing from the sciences of mental development and learning and technologies of educational measurement. Boykin, Gardner, Gordon, Kagan, Messick, Sternberg and still more have called attention the variety of ways in which people differ in their mental functions. These works also indicate that mentation is multi-dimensional and transactional, as such, probes of isolated cognitive functions are simply inadequate to represent the developed abilities of individuals and groups, especially when they come from diverse populations. If mental development and learning are best understood as involving affective, cognitive and situative processes (Greeno), then measurement can not be limited to on-demand-recall of iconic

representations of knowledge, techniques and values drawn from a truncated and hegemonic canon. If the development of intellectual competence is the primary function of pedagogy, and if such competence is thought to be reflected in the capacity to adapt available resources to the solving of routine as well as novel problems, then the assessment of the outcomes of education must provide learners with challenges and opportunities that are varied enough to enable the demonstration of such competence. Obviously, our traditional technology of assessment is increasingly challenged by these shifting conceptions.

4) The final issue to be dealt with in this paper and which flows from the intersect between diversity and assessment concerns the generation of a plan for the development of an equitable system of educational assessment in which diversity, equity and excellence are privileged. In my paper on that subject which appeared in the Summer 1995 issue of the Journal of Negro Education, I have identified nine implications. Such a system might well include:

1. Diversity in teaching, learning and assessment experiences, tasks, contents, contexts, demands and referents;
2. Flexibility in the timing of teaching, learning and assessment entry points, and time spans allowed for learning and performance;
3. Multiplicity in the perspectives to which students are exposed, as well as in the perspectives which students are encouraged to express, and which are accepted, with the requirement that they engage in comparison and justification;
4. Critical sampling from canonical and non-canonical voices, knowledges and techniques;
5. The use of hyper-text, i.e., probes that include imbedded substantive and/or procedural knowledge with the requirement

that the absent element be provided by the respondent;

6. Choice involving self-selected and teacher/examiner selected options for the demonstration of what is known;

7. Opportunity to identify from one's indigenous experience examples of canonical knowledge and technique, and from the canonical, comparable examples of the indigenous;

8. Opportunity for individual and cooperative learning and performance ~~opportunities~~; and

9. Opportunity for self-designated tasks from learner/examinee generated inventories of knowledge, skill, and understanding: "What do I know or want to know, and how do I choose to demonstrate or learn it?"

In this paper I have challenged the current national emphasis on the promotion of educational standards and new tests of academic achievement as being flawed and not in the best interest of low income and low status populations. By implication I have suggested that this movement may not be in the best interest of education. I have argued that existing educational assessment technology is limited in its capacity to serve the needs of a diverse population of learners, and have made suggestions for an improved system of assessment. Rather than educational outcome standards that are informed by what we want our children to know and know how to do, it may well be that our concern for outcome standards, if we must have them, should focus on what we want our children to be and to become - intellectually and socially competent, productive and compassionate human beings. Since the criteria for these competencies and their achievement may not be well understood, our national and state debates might well focus on the nature of humane intellectual and personal competence, the conditions necessary to its achievement, and the creation of a national will to honestly pursue ~~for~~ all of our people.

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