Besting Testing Hysteria

Reasonable Preparation for Standardized Tests

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STANDARDIZED TESTS, born in the early 1900s, have taken firm root in the American educational system. During the testing movement of the 1920s, specific-response (or "objective") tests were developed, while essay examinations were criticized as being unreliable and inaccurate. Today, short-answer, standardized tests remain a grim reality. According to a recent survey by *Newsweek*, forty-nine states have implemented tests for measuring student achievement.[1] In many instances, these are "high-stakes" tests: if a student does not perform well, he or she may not be allowed to progress to the next grade or to graduate (as is now the case in twenty-six states). On the basis of poor test scores, college admission might be denied to a student, despite other achievements. *Newsweek* states that there is a growing "anxiety among parents, teachers, and kids over the proliferation of standardized tests" and that "reformers try to improve school quality by holding educators accountable" for test results.

A school's academic reputation is largely based on achievement test scores. For example, student performance in the largest school district in Georgia was recently touted by this newspaper headline: "County Tops National, State SAT Averages." State superintendent of schools Linda Schrenko attributed Georgia's gains in SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) scores to a rigorous core curriculum, increased math requirements for graduation, the use of funds for all sophomore students to take the Pre-SAT test, and "hard work by administrators to improve student achievement."[2]

What will the future bring in the way of testing policies and legislated mandates? According to Judy Mathers, a policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States, "We're in the middle of the maelstrom. It's very difficult to see which way it's going to go."[3] Many teachers are concerned that what they teach and how they teach may be increasingly determined by the dictates of the standardized test "empire."

How should middle school teachers respond to this sort of pressure? Ignoring the storm of standardized tests would not help students or schools. On the other hand, "teaching to the test" exclusively (with constant memory drills and practice of test-taking skills) can backfire as students, and teachers, succumb to boredom. A more rational approach might be for teachers to compare the form and content of standardized tests with their own standards for learning and assessment. If teachers, throughout the year, would refer to their own chosen standards (as they plan lessons and design their own assessments of student learning), they could probably enhance students' performance in standardized test situations—without having to make this result the "holy grail" of their professional life.[4]

Content of Standardized Tests

Let's take a closer look at the actual social studies content in a widely used current standardized test, the ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills). A recent survey[5] of the content of the social studies portions of this test revealed six general categories of knowledge being assessed (Table 1). These categories were present in recent tests for third, fifth, and eighth grade students in roughly similar proportions, except for that of his-

Table 1. The Social Studies Content of the ITBS

Category	Sub-topic	Proportion*
History		**10%**
	Traditions and heritage of the people of Earth	
	People who have shaped history	
	Examples in history of conflict or cooperation	
	Situations in history involving change or adaptation	
Geography		**27%**
	Physical features of Earth	
	Interactions of people with the environment	
Economics		**23%**
	Work and workers	
	Economic principle of supply and demand	
	Material needs and wants of people	
	Economic impact of technology	
	Economic interdependence of people and nations	
Political Science		**23%**
	Rights and responsibilities of citizens	
	Rules and laws	
	Structures and services of government	
Sociology/Anthropology		**13%**
	Human culture	
	Social interactions of people	
	Human needs and wants	
	Psychological principles of human behavior	
Related Social Sciences		**4%**
	Human culture as seen through fine and applied arts	
	Systems of ethics and human values	

** Proportion equals the number of questions on a sub-topic divided by the total social studies questions (n = 30) in the test for third graders.*

tory, which increased. (In the third grade test, 30 questions make up the social studies portion, including three questions (10 %) from history (Table 1, line 1). At the fifth grade, this proportion rose to 20%; at the eighth grade, it was 28%.)

Of course, the difficulty of the questions increases with grade level. For example, in the third grade, students may be asked to (1) identify an original American cultural group, (2) identify an animal that was historically important to American travel and settlement, and (3) choose an appropriate form of transportation for a specific purpose. Fifth grade students may be asked to (1) recognize a historical term or concept, (2) state one reason for colonization, and (3) identify the historical settlement pattern of the United States.

NCSS Standards for Assessment

A comparison of the ITBS categories (Table 1) and questions with some of the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards[6] shows many similarities. The ten NCSS standards were written by teachers and other social studies professionals for use by schools, departments, and individual teachers when they design curricula and assessments. Each standard has "performance expectations" that can serve as the basis for assessing student knowledge at different ages.

Ⅱ Time, Continuity, & Change

"Demonstrate an ability to use correctly vocabulary associated with time such as past, present, future, and long ago; read and construct simple timelines; identify examples of change; and recognize examples of cause and effect relationships."

This performance expectation might be represented on standardized tests by having children read a short paragraph and then place an event appropriately on a timeline. Young students might sequence pictures of many different activities or events. Older students might sequence phrases or sentences. On many state and "gatekeeper" tests, middle school students will be asked to write a brief, reasoned essay on the basis of historical information provided in a test question.

Ⅲ People, Places, & Environments

"Use appropriate resources, data sources, and geographic tools such as atlases, data bases, grid systems, charts, graphs, and maps to generate, manipulate, and interpret information."

A surety on standardized tests is that students will have many opportunities to interpret various representations of data. (Many tests rely heavily on these skills at the expense of other social studies knowledge and skills.) Younger students might read and interpret cardinal directions and trace a path. They may be asked to identify relative locations. Middle school students might read and interpret sophisticated maps and graphs and find information on them quickly. Often, this skill is assessed in conjunction with a related narrative in which students are given large chunks of information, which they then have to weed out. Geographic land forms and related vocabulary (terms about natural resources and cultural traits) are often featured.

VII Production, Distribution, & Consumption

"Give examples that show how scarcity and choice govern our economic decisions."

Students should show an understanding of basic economics concepts and be able to interpret various types of economics situations and data, such as charts and graphs. A typical question for younger children might ask them to distinguish between needs and wants. Middle school children might be asked to describe the role that supply, demand, and price play in determining what is on the market. Specialized economics vocabulary is prevalent, as are questions about economic problems and relationships between production, distribution, and consumption.

Thus, content of standardized tests in elementary and middle grade social studies does not have to be at odds with school districts and states that aim to use various types of assessment tools and to meet benchmarks set by local, state, and national standards. Nor do the tests have to be at odds with our day-to-day work as social studies teachers if our goals include teaching specific skills and content, and then measuring student learning in several different ways.

Principles for Improving Performance

I would like to offer the following few principles to help with systematic thinking, discussion, and practice.

1. Standards for social studies education (as stated by individuals, schools, governments, professional organizations, and testing institutions) often overlap.
2. Classroom assessments can be based on a teacher's own standards for content knowledge and skill acquisition.
3. Ongoing classroom assessment can help students prepare for the end-of-the-year (or the occasional) standardized test.
4. Reasonable efforts can be made to prepare students for the emotional and "mechanical" aspects of test-taking (for example, by reviewing techniques of time management, learning how to eliminate multiple choices, practicing methods of at-the-desk relaxation, writing an essay under a deadline, etc.).
5. Student performance and knowledge can be assessed in many different ways, some of which can be similar to standardized tests (for example, multiple choice, fill in the blank, short essay, creation of a chart or graph given data, etc.) and some not (creating a dramatic performance, holding a debate, drawing a picture, or composing a website).
6. Students can be tested on different types of problem solving, literacy, and reasoning, as well as specific knowledge of various topics. (For example, analytical questions can assess a student's ability to understand and use maps, charts, graphs, and other forms of data representation. Vocabulary questions assess one's ability to remember the meaning of terms. Simple historical questions test one's knowledge of major events, people, and dates.)
7. Beyond formally administering a particular standardized test, teachers can learn about the methods of assessment used in a particular test instrument, the skills that students are expected to have, and the content that students are expected to know.
8. Standardized tests are one form of assessment among many. Social studies teachers could provide an important voice in local, state, and national debates over the meaning and use of test results.

By systematically integrating these principles into a year-long school curriculum, teachers (and their students) might experience increased confidence when the season of standardized testing arrives.[7] After all, assessment of some sort is a useful part of any learning situation. Maybe we can take reasonable steps to improve students' performance on these tests without getting caught up in "testing hysteria."

Notes

1. D. McGinn, "The Big Score," *Newsweek* (September 6, 1999): 46-51.
2. D. Zillich, "County Tops National, State SAT Averages," *Gwinnett Daily Post* (Wednesday, September 1, 1999): 1A, 9A.
3. McGinn, 51.
4. S. Walton and K. Taylor, "How Did You Know the Answer Was Boxcar?" *Educational Leadership* 54, No. 4 (December 1996/January 1997): 38-40.
5. Figures provided by the Georgia Council on Economic Education.
6. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994).
7. G. Wiggins, "Practicing What We Preach in Designing Authentic Assessments," *Educational Leadership* 54, No. 4 (December 1996/January 1997): 18-25.

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