Listening to Teacher’s Voices: Current Educational Assessment Practices in First Grade

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Abstract

Teachers have the responsibility to educate students. Teachers have an ethical responsibility to provide a safe and nurturing environment while ensuring academic success. Debate regarding standardized testing in the public schools has been a topic of interest and of concern for many parents, teachers, students, and stakeholders. Standardized testing occurs in all grade levels. First grade students undergo different mandated assessments, standardized and non-standardized, via whole-group and individual administration. Assessments administered include state, district, and school mandated. This study addresses the importance and relevance of assessments administered to first grade students, first grade teachers’ perspectives, and the impact this may have on teaching and learning. Surveys were distributed to first grade teachers from elementary campuses in a south Texas school district during the 2007 spring semester. Data analysis as well as discussion and recommendations are herein presented.

Introduction

Early childhood teachers must closely supervise all students, ranging in ages from 4 to 8 years. While closely supervising and teaching these young children, teachers must also administer many different types of assessments. Individual assessments are conducted by teachers in the primary grades which include pre-kinder, kinder and first grade. State mandated standardized whole-group administration of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, TAKS, begins in the 3rd grade. First grade students are administered some standardized whole-group assessments as well as some individual assessments. First grade teachers use designated instructional time to assess their students at different times throughout the school year.

George W. Bush, as governor in 1998, said “Let’s heed the reading research that says the window of opportunity is grades K through 3” (Valencia, 2003, 214). This may have brought down the standardized-test ‘trend’ to the primary levels such as first grade. Controversy exists regarding standardized testing at such early grades. Researchers warn that “We have to be concerned with whether our assessments are reliable because we do not want to alter our teaching, or decide on a child’s placement, on the basis of a flawed judgment” (Fawson, 2006, 115).

The Texas state government agency known as the Texas Education Agency (TEA) places certain academic standards or goals for each grade level and each district must assure that all the schools teach by these standards. Additionally, the districts conduct some form of standardized testing as a form of checks and balances that will provide legislators data necessary to defend their states’ educational practices (Palmaffy, 1998).

According to the Texas Education Agency, first grade assessments include the TOP, Texas Observation Protocol. The TOP is administered yearly through teacher observations and through the portfolio assessment method. Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing skills are rated by
the primary classroom teacher (www.tea.state.tx.us). The TPRI, Texas Primary Inventory, while not listed in the TEA website, is also administered about 3 times a year. The TPRI, created by The University of Texas and The Texas Education Agency must be administered by teachers in grades Kinder through 2nd. The TPRI assesses book and print awareness, phonemic awareness, graphophonemic knowledge, reading accuracy, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. The results of this assessment are excluded from the Texas accountability system (Valencia, 2003).

Research states that Texas is one of the states farthest along in the implementation of standards-based school reform. As of 2003, Texas was 1 of 16 states that have institutionalized high-stakes testing promotional policies at the elementary level. It should be noted that this number might be currently higher. It is debated that high-stakes testing may have an adverse impact on minorities such as Hispanics, however court rulings have been in favor of the standardized assessment known as TAKS, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (Valencia, 2003).

A first grade classroom revolves around literacy. Learning to read is the primary goal in a first grade classroom. Focus is placed on oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and print motivation as tools for learning to read. “Assessment is the necessary means for systematically collecting and analyzing information on children’s literacy development in these areas. (It) contributes directly to the improvements in the educational services provided to children and their families” (Roskos, 2004, 92). A high-quality early education has been linked to a positive academic achievement in the later years. Early learning standards and assessments therefore can be considered as very critical components for academic success.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) are in place to enforce the notion that children learn through meaningful, fun experiences. Preschool children at an early developmental stage range from preschool though grade 2. Children will learn to read and write via careful and appropriate planning and instruction. Intense drilling, extensive whole-group instruction, practicing skills in isolation and high-stakes standardized testing are not part of a DAP curriculum. DAP reiterates that children learn at different paces and develop at their own time. DAP includes teachers that understand the need for a balance between explicit, thematic, spontaneous, and playful instruction. (Morrow, 2004).

An early literacy assessment deems itself necessary to identify students that may be at risk of failure. Furthermore, assessment is needed to evaluate programs and make appropriate changes where needed. While questions regarding assessment are present, not enough answers are available. A system must be effective and assessments methods need to be evaluated for time measures. Perhaps not all students need to be assessed all the time. Additionally, assessment data gathered can serve different purposes instead of assessing constantly (Roskos, 2004).

Further research acknowledges that running records play a primary role in a first grade classroom as well. A running record consists of the teacher sitting with a student who then reads leveled books. The students’ running record levels achieved are documented to demonstrate progress and guide classroom instruction. In an article in The Journal of Educational Research, the reliability of running records is examined. Teachers have relied on running records for many years. The researchers state that “reliability data have not been conclusive regarding the use of running records” (Fawson, 2006, 113). Yet, they are a common practice in first grade classrooms and are used to track student progress. Focus must be placed on training teachers to correctly score the running records and thus in turn provide valid, reliable results. Attaining a students’ reading level after administering one running record is insufficient. The use of at least three passages from one same level should be used to obtain the level of reading per student. In analyzing this information,
a teacher with 17 students would administer and score 51 running records and average these scores to obtain the students' reading level. However, the frequency of running record assessment is unclear (Fawson, 2006).

The Texas Education Agency gives districts wide discretion in running their school systems. School districts mandate certain assessments and expect results that yield data that will validate their practices. This must be taken into consideration when analyzing assessments in first grade, since variations will exist district to district (Palmaffy, 1998).

Assessing students may be done for different reasons, one being to identify students that may be in need of extra assistance or additional interventions. Other reasons for assessing students in first grade may include identifying individual academic strengths and weaknesses, for progress monitoring, or program evaluation. Other grade levels, however assess for other reasons. As identified in SB4, students must pass the reading TAKS in the 3rd Grade in order to be promoted. The then-governor George W. Bush intended to eliminate social promotion and as a result initiated standardized-testing for promotion reform (Valencia, 2003).

Some may wonder how teachers manage standardized testing in schools along with curriculum standards among other things. In one study, members of the community and stakeholders were surveyed before surveying teachers in two school districts in New York. Goals 2000, which is a federal plan that delineates educational standards or each state, increased the need for accountability. New York schools, as many other states do, rank the schools according to test results. Thus, teachers feel a great demand to prepare students to do well on assessments. “This need for accountability can lead to considerable pressure on students, teachers, and administrators” (Klein, 2006, 146).

A study done by the National Education Agency (NEA) in 2001 found that out of 1000 voters, 69% agreed with testing to assess student performance in schools. The current issue however is how schools can manage the large amount of testing that takes place and how to adapt to this trend. The questions analyzed from the survey regarding standardized testing showed that 77% of the statements were positive while 23% were negative. Regarding teaching, authentic instruction received a 4% and adapting instruction to individual needs received a 9%. Most teachers stated that they teach test taking strategies and that “standardized testing drives much of their teaching” (Klein, 2006, 151). Research suggests that because of standardized testing, authentic instruction formats such as portfolio assessment, creative reading and writing opportunities, and lab-style science and math, are being lost. With regards to the pressure regarding standardized testing, somehow teachers are managing despite increased expectations (Klein, 2006).

Some researchers believe that “the use of high-stakes testing distorts the very schooling processes the standards-based school reform movement strives to reform” (Valencia, 2003). Some wonder if high stakes testing should continue or if “the more preferred and educationally sound low-stakes, diagnostic testing that incorporates multiple data sources in the assessment process” should be adopted instead (Valencia, 2003, 621).

Research conducted in 2006 describes “why high-stakes testing often has negative effects and why the implementation of rapid assessment systems could reduce unintended negative consequences of testing” (Yeh, 2006, 621). Researchers are constantly addressing ways to improve the educational system.

Students need feedback to allow them to track their performance and set goals. Feedback obtain from assessments can have a positive effect when properly used. However, research warns about the delivery of feedback. Some students may use feedback towards self improvement and goal attainment while others may become discouraged and lose confidence and lower their goals
or completely give up. With this in mind, educators have a great responsibility to provide proper feedback and to know their students well enough to determine the appropriate feedback and manner in which to provide it (Hattie, 1998).

Although standardized tests reinforce the concept of teaching skills in isolation, research proves otherwise. When students are taught the big ideas thoroughly instead of standards one at a time, they will have better understanding for meaning. Additionally, teachers have difficulty finding the time to teach so many small concepts via a timeline of standards taught. Teaching for meaning will allow students to retain information and in turn produce high test scores. Teaching must be meaningful and students must be able to see the big idea and how skills and concepts connect with each other (McTighe, 2004).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the usefulness of assessments currently used throughout a district in South Texas. The study intended to identify assessments that teachers regard as useful and needed as well as those that are regarded as useless and unimportant. It is the intention of this study to gather sufficient valuable data to encourage educational leaders of the district to create a comprehensive, efficient valuable form of assessment that would benefit all stakeholders. Attention was given to different assessments and their purpose and reliability, as described by 1st Grade teachers. Teachers’ perspectives and their educational knowledge was valued and analyzed via data collection from responses provided in the survey. This study addressed the issue of quality instead of quantity regarding assessment in the first grade. Effective decision-making practices by district leaders leading to educational reform that will benefit the students is the primary purpose of this study.

**Instrument**

The instrument utilized for this study consisted of a two page survey. This survey was created in a teacher-friendly format, occupying only one page of text, front and back. The survey initiated with some personal data as well as a description of the current class demographics and structure. A likert-scale section followed along with some short answer questions as well. Some yes, no questions were also included as well as a section available for additional teacher comments. The total number of questions in this instrument was 10.

**Participants**

This study was conducted in May 2007 with permission from the school district. All 26 elementary campuses located in different parts of the city, were mailed a clasp envelope with seven surveys along with a pre-paid envelope. Each clasp envelope was addressed to the first grade team representative from each campus. A letter was included with specific instructions as well as the reassurance of confidentiality. All surveys were to be return within a specified time frame. All campus were encouraged to participate. Fourteen campuses returned the surveys.

A total of 75 surveys were returned and interpreted for this study. Of the teachers that returned the survey, 2 were male, and 73 were female. The age, years of experience and certifications varied drastically. Although not all items were answered by some participants, the answered portions were used as data, thus explaining the difference in total numbers of some data analysis.
Analysis

All surveys were analyzed. By use of a spreadsheet, all survey responses were documented and tallied. All data was analyzed for research purposes. When asked about the usefulness of state assessments, 13 participants stated they found state assessments not to be important at all, 22 found them to be somewhat important, while 39 stated to find state assessments very important. Regarding the usefulness of district assessments, 14 stated not important, 16 stated somewhat important and 44 stated district assessments were very important. Responses about the importance of school-mandated assessments included 5 that responded they were not important, 17 somewhat important, and 51 very important. When asked about the importance of teacher created assessments, 0 stated them to not be important, 7 said somewhat important, while 68 responded them to be very important.

When asked about the usefulness and relevance of the Texas Primary Reading inventory (TPRI), 6 participants stated it was not useful, 14 stated that the TPRI was somewhat useful, and 55 teachers responded that the TPRI is very useful for them. 41 teachers expressed their approval of TPRI and expressed that results from this assessment are welcomed, while 7 commented that the TPRI could be eliminated from the assessments administered in first grade. 12 teachers strongly voiced the need for the elimination of the middle of the year administration of the TPRI.

The Texas Observation Protocol is another assessment teachers must comply with since the result of this assessment are provided to the state. 15 teachers survey stated that this test is not important, 27 stated that it was important, 25 stated that it was very important, and 8 did not respond. Thus it can be concluded that most teachers believe this is an important assessment. However, teachers feel indifferent towards this assessment. That is, 2 teachers stated they like this assessment, 16 teachers stated that this test could be done away with, but most are okay with this assessment. The results of this assessment are recorded via teacher observations and some student work samples in some cases. Perhaps since this assessment does not seem to occupy too much educational time, teachers might sway in its favor.

This district has a group of educational specialists that have designed an aligned curriculum that is taught in every campus. All first grade teachers in the district teach the same concepts and standards at the same time, for the specified time allotted by this aligned curriculum known and Scope and Sequence. Teachers must teach certain standards and then the district provides an assessment known and the TEKS Targeted Test (TTT) for each subject area. The TTT's are administered at designated times by the district. Teachers administer, score, and record the results of each TTT. In first grade, 5 TTT's are administered every 6 weeks. This number slightly increases as the grade level increases. The scope and sequence and TTT's were items which many teachers surveyed comment about. Amazingly, 26 teachers describe the TTT’s are not being important, 14 important, and 20 very important. 25 teachers commented that the TTTS should be done away with, while no teachers commented on its behalf. Running records are an assessment tool favored by all teachers. 8 teachers stated running records were important while 67 teachers stated that running records were very important. Running record results must be interpreted with caution as research has shown that one running record score may not be the sole indicator of literacy. Several running records are recommended to be administered and then an average obtained, although this may take a lot of time (Fawson, 2006).

Teachers in first grade seem to favor the use of weekly spelling tests. 2 teachers feel they are not important, 8 stated they were important, and 65 stated they were very important. Similar data was obtained regarding weekly math tests. No teachers stated that math tests were not important,
5 teachers stated that math tests were important, and 69 teachers stated that math tests are very important. These tests are used to monitor study skills, recall, and for grade purposes.

Teachers also administer a language assessment via the LAS test to some students, particularly the students in a bilingual program. 7 teachers stated that the LAS test is not important, 22 stated the test is important, and 43 stated the test is very important. This assessment is administered on an individual basis to each bilingual student and is scheduled for administration towards the end of the school year.

Teachers were also surveyed about what happens after assessments are administered. 55 teachers stated that they record results of all assessments administered, 14 teachers stated that they record results of most of the assessments, and 5 teachers said they record some of the assessments while 1 did not respond. When asked whether they analyze the assessments, 50 teachers stated they analyze all the assessments, 20 analyze most of them, and 4 teachers analyze only some of the assessments.

When asked whether students’ safety is ever jeopardized due to assessments, 41 teachers said yes, 27 said no, and 7 did not respond. Thus, most teachers in first grade feel that the safety of their students is jeopardized due to assessment practices. Additionally, 48 teachers state that some assessments are unnecessary, 26 stated they are necessary, and 1 did not respond. 44 teachers indicated that some of these tests administered are not appropriate for first grade students, 29 teachers stated they are appropriate, and 2 did not respond. However, when asked whether assessment is necessary, 57 teachers said yes, 13 said no, and 5 did not respond. Interestingly, first grade teachers believe too many tests are being administered, with 53 stating too many tests are being administered, 18 stated they don’t think too many tests are being administered, and 4 did not respond. Teacher responses were mixed when asked about whether how they feel their district ranks in assessment practices. 25 teachers stated that other districts might do the same amount of assessing, 19 teachers feel that other districts administer less assessments, 1 teacher stated that this district is administering more assessments than other districts while 30 teachers did not respond to this item.

Teacher comments lead one to believe in the importance of teacher assistants in a first grade classroom, especially during assessment periods when the teacher is clearly unable to teach or supervise the class. 52 teachers responded that they do not get help in the classrooms, 4 teachers stated they get help some of the time, and 14 teachers stated they do get help. Comments were included by teachers that during TPRI administration, a substitute teacher supervised the class for half a day or in some cases one day. Many additional sheets of comments were analyzed and included in this studies’ report.

**Discussion**

It can be noted from the responses regarding the usefulness of assessments, that teachers feel the most useful assessments administered are those tailored to the needs of their classrooms, followed by those mandated by the school, then those mandated by their district, and the least useful are the state-mandated assessments.

Among a survey done in 2001, "The use of test scores from school-, district-,and/or state-mandated testing programs was the least chosen assessment approach and the least valued source of information" by educators (Trepanier-Street, 236).

Although, some teachers stated that the TPRI takes too much time from teaching, most of the teachers also feel that the results from the TRPI are useful. It was noted however, that some
teachers lose out on time they could use for instruction or planning while scoring and recording the results from the TPRI. Some teachers expressed concerns that administering the TPRI three times a year was too much. Some teachers stated that administering the TPRI at the beginning and at then end of the year would be sufficient for program planning purposes. One teacher stated that “This test takes an average of 45 minutes per student. It usually takes two weeks to test all the students. Many other school districts utilize palm pilots for the TPRI thus eliminating the need to input score for each child. This might save some time for teachers”. Other teachers stated that while the TPRI is a good instrument, results may not be accurate since the testing is done during instructional time while also monitoring the other students in the class and with interruptions and distractions. “This is very difficult to do with 18 children also seeking our attention.” Another teacher stated that “many times we can’t provide them [students] with adequate attention because of all the testing that is taking place. We need another adult to help us ensure the children’s safety especially during testing times.” From results gathered, it can be speculated that teachers occupy about 6 weeks’ time per school year on administering the TPRI to their first grade students. During this administration time, their district still has standards that should be taught. Some teachers are unable to comply with the teaching of the standards during this period due to the administration of the TPRI. It is also considered that additional time is used by the teachers for the recording or analysis of the results from this assessment.

Many teacher comments were recorded about the scope and sequence and the TTT’s. Some teachers addressed the need for other district personnel to test these students, since this assessment is on a one-to-one basis and takes a lot of instructional time away. First grade teachers feel they are often being left in the dark: with usually no teacher aides, teaching to do, assessment to do, clerical work like recording results, plus all the other usual teacher duties as well. One teacher’s comments summed up some of the teachers’ comments when it was stated that a first grade class is like “a three-ring circus effect with one ring master.” Most issues could be alleviated if teachers’ suggestions were heard by district leaders.

Running records are a preferred assessment tool by first grade teachers. Although they take up a considerable amount of teaching time, teachers find the results to be beneficial. Some teachers however, do feel that too many running records are taking place. One teacher commented on how all day Friday, the students are assessed individually on their literacy growth via these running records. Some teachers suggest perhaps assessing students with running records once every six weeks. Another teacher comments that the campus’ Reading Specialist should be recording the running record results on those students that are struggling. Perhaps the notion of not assessing all the students all of the time may be a recommendation. Students at risk may need more frequent assessments via running records than students that are already becoming fluent readers. However, some teachers express that they must assess on running record for purposes of obtaining a grade. Research supports that idea that assessments should be taking place for monitoring and program evaluation, not to obtain grades.

Spelling and math tests administered by teachers are a favored assessment tool. Teachers indicate the length of time occupied by the administering and scoring of these tests is favorable. Furthermore, these test are administered as a whole-class, not individually, possibly explaining a reason why teachers prefer these type of curriculum-based assessments.

Although most teachers find the LAS test to be important, some teachers feel that since this assessment is done on a one-to-one basis, teaching time is once again utilized for assessment purposes. One teacher stated that “Since the beginning of April, one week was spent on TPRI
testing, the next 2 weeks LAS testing and running records in between, [with] no help and some of us tested ITBS [that] so little time was spent on direct instruction”.

Most teachers record and analyze results from assessments. Teachers indicate that the safety of the students may be jeopardized due to assessments practices. From data gathered, it can be concluded that students’ safety may be jeopardized when the teacher is testing one student for 45 minutes, while the rest of the class is unsupervised.

Despite the amount of time assessments seem to be occupying in first grade, and despite all the scoring and recording of data that teachers are doing, a vast majority of teachers state that assessments are needed for progress monitoring. Most teachers also indicate that some of the assessments currently in place are not appropriate for their students and most teachers state that some of the assessments are unnecessary. First grade teachers overwhelmingly stated that too many assessments are being administered to first grade students. However, teachers seem to have different opinions about how their district ranks in the amounts of assessments administered: 25 believe other districts administer the same amount of tests, 19 stated other districts administer fewer assessments, and 30 teachers did not respond.

Teachers reiterate time and time again that teacher assistants are greatly needed in first grade, especially during assessment periods. Although some teachers are grateful that during TPRI assessment, a substitute teacher is provided for half a day or one full day, this is not enough. Data gathered from teachers concludes that the TPRI takes weeks to administer, therefore explaining why most teachers reported that they actually do not get help. One teacher stated “our teaching time suffers and the children’s safety is put in jeopardy because of so much testing”.

Recommenda
tions

Some researchers are concerned that teachers may not get the data they need from assessments in time to make adjustments or implement any improvements. Furthermore, some believe that teachers do not have enough information about assessments their students are taking. Additionally, researchers warn that results may not be accurate and many variables may be affecting such reliability (Winchester, 2006).

Research conducted by Donna Harrington-Lueker justifies the need for standardized assessments and its value in the education field. She analyzed different states throughout the country and concluded that while districts and states have standards; these are to guide teaching and not to replace it. Teachers and districts must actively participate in providing an educational setting where individuality is valued and goals must be met. “Developmentally appropriate practice is not in opposition to standards, assessment, and accountability” (Harrington-Leuker, 2000, 15). Educational leaders should remember that children develop differently and standards and assessments are tools for developing instruction, not for penalizing. Assessments are needed to assess educational practices and improve programs.

Some research has concluded that instead of teaching skills in isolation and attempting to cover many concepts, teachers should practice ‘uncoverage’ which means that education must focus deeply on a few concepts rather than slightly teach many concepts. Researchers have discovered that uncoverage is more likely to increase student achievement. Furthermore, it was determined that when uncoverage is implemented, students are prepared to move on to deeper, more complex understanding of concepts. When fewer topics at each grade level are taught thoroughly, students will be better prepared to apply higher thinking skills in more difficult concepts (McTighe, 2004).
For this district, educational reform must begin with different departments gathering to analyze all the assessments required. Experienced teachers’ views will definitely be a positive contribution when educational leaders meet and make decisions. Perhaps some assessments can be done away with, especially if the overwhelming majority of teachers state their lack of importance or usefulness. Teachers need to be a part of the decision making process, since they are the ones in the classroom administering assessments and responsible for student growth.

Additionally, a teacher stated that “curriculum needs to be revamped; excessive concepts have been planned with no room for review/reinforce/re-teach time; difficult to teach for mastery”. Other teachers state the need for scope and sequence to be redesigned. The TTT’s seem to be a poor addition of assessments with little or no advantage since teachers are unable to teach all the concepts tested, causing the results of this test to be invalid. Students should not be tested on concepts they have not been taught. Teachers recommended leaving time designated for review and not including concepts to be taught if a one-to-one assessment is scheduled to occur.

Technology can alleviate some of the clerical duties that seem to be taking up teacher’s time. Palm pilots available to record results of some assessments are needed. Clerical work can also be done by clerical staff that is not held accountable for student success. Ideally, teachers should be teaching and excessively time-consuming assessments should be conducted by other personnel not responsible for a classroom. If teachers must engage in weeks of child by child assessments, then someone else should be conducting the class. If teaching is scheduled to take place concurrently with one-to-one assessment, this requires the need for two teachers: one to assess and one to teach; it’s simple math.

Running records should be taking place occasionally and teachers can observe and document reading growth by other means other than by formal assessment every week. Teachers need to be creative and resourceful with their teaching time. The more time dedicated to teaching, the more their students will learn. Although assessments will need to be administered, teachers need not add unnecessary assessments. Running records are an effective method for evaluating reading progress, yet not all students must be administered at the same time, all the time.

The data concluded that overall, teachers feel confident in assessing students briefly and in a whole class setting. This seems to be appropriately planned to meet the needs of the students. Teachers want to have enough time to teach rather than be assessing. Early childhood educators know the importance of hands-on activities for young students. It seems difficulty for the teachers to apply developmentally appropriate early childhood practices when too many concepts must be taught and time is of the essence. Additionally, teachers stated the need for more materials and supplies for enriching academic activities rather than additional workbooks. The first grade teachers have the intention of conducting small group teaching yet find this difficult to do with so many subjects and standards to teach. Whole class instruction has been effective and takes less time than small group instruction. Teachers value their teaching time and know that it’s limited due to assessments.

The number of students in a classroom seems to be a particular issue as well. Teachers express the need for a teacher assistant. It is recommended that teacher assistants be available for first grade classroom since this is a crucial grade level where the students will learn to read. Teachers accept responsibility and seem to be resourceful in their teaching and assessment methods. Concern is expressed about other programs such as reading recovery and reading intervention where perhaps more accountability should be shown.
Via this study, teachers took the liberty to express improvements that could benefit first grade classrooms. These included: allowing more than 2 field trips, having teacher assistants, allowing students to have recess daily, more freedom in teaching, less paperwork, and more focus on phonics.

**Conclusion**

One teacher stated that “teaching at the first grade level has become a big challenge. Politicians forget that ‘Childhood is a journey…’. We have too many children being pushed into a ‘one size fits all’ curriculum. Is it any wonder we have more children with [negative] attitudes towards schooling today?”

Educational research is valuable to society because the leaders of the future are depending on the leaders of today. It is through research that programs are evaluated and different strategies applied as well. This research focused on first grade only since first grade is the grade when students learn to read and for some students, this is their first educational experience. The start of a students’ educational journey will often set the tone for the rest of their journey. Many times, educational leaders are not aware of issues impacting a first grade classroom. While leaders attempt to make the best decisions and at the same time search for accountability measures, teaching shifts from the priority spot as it is replaced by assessment in response to the high demand for accountability. While different agencies are requiring assessments, duplication and unneeded assessments may be the result of the lack of communication within the agencies. “Innovative districts are lifting the paperwork burden off the shoulders of teachers and staff and freeing them to spend more time in the classroom helping students make real, meaningful learning gains” (Amprey, 2005, 31).

Too often measurement and assessment in classrooms relates to the acquisition of knowledge, and ignores the other functions of learning such as deep understanding, efficient intuitive use, acquiring multiple flexible strategies, adaptive action control, and achievement motivation. Students need feedback to improve academically and to set goals. Research notes that most current tests simply assess recall and are primarily used for accountability purposes rather than for feedback purposes (Snow, 1989).

Standardized testing affects a teacher’s focus on instruction. Teachers may be preparing their students for taking a test on some occasions year-round. True, meaningful instruction may be lost. Incremental testing along with increasing pressure for high test results have caused many teachers to design instruction based solely on test taking skills rather than developmentally appropriate explicit, spontaneous instruction. Since students must master certain concepts in certain grade levels, standardized testing is utilized to measure attainment of these standards. Testing frequency and design have changed along with the demand for accountability as well. In years passed, standardized assessments were administered every three to four years in comparison to present times where students are assessed several times in one school year. Additionally, the assessments not only measure standard mastery, but also are the sole decider of whether a student is promoted to the next grade level or not. It is not surprising that administrators and teachers feel the responsibility of students being able to attain high testing scores especially since results play such an important role in society. “Contemporary teaching is focused mostly on success in testing and meeting imposed standards as opposed to developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills” (Klein, 2006, 146). Teachers are more opposed to standardized testing than in favor of it. “We also wonder whether some teachers’ strategies are likely to lead to higher scores on test, in detriment of
lasting knowledge-construction” (Klein, 2006, 158). One teacher who published an article summed up her reasons for leaving the teaching profession: “Steadily mounting benchmark assessments, pilot test, and ultimately federally mandated standardized tests sucked out months of instructional time” (Boomer, 2005, 168).

Research states that assessments are needed to systematically collect and analyze information about students’ literacy development and this contributes to improvements and changes made to positively affect education. Researchers warn about the possibility of misusing assessment results. It is understood that literacy assessment of any age learner can be complicated. It should also be noted that literacy development may be difficult to obtain via traditional standardized measures. “Considerable thought is needed to ensure a realistic match between the requirements for collecting early literacy assessment information and the setting’s capability to meet them.” (Roskos, 2004, 3).

Educational reform is needed. First grade teachers need to do what they do best: teach and make learning meaningful and fun. Teachers should be allowed to use teachable moments, design thematic units to meet the interest of the students, and to be spontaneous. Let’s let teachers be teachers, otherwise change their profession to testers instead.
References


