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Author(s): Judith A. Langer and Gordon M. Pradl
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Standardized Testing:
A Call for Action

Judith A. Langer
Gordon M. Pradl
(for the NCTE Commission on Reading)

Although standardized tests have always played a prominent role in American schools, this trend has intensified during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Beyond the control of the local school district, we now find many state education departments setting checkpoints calling for the periodic examination of each student's basic skills during both elementary and secondary school years, and decisions regarding class placement are all too frequently based upon these scores. Further, numerous state legislatures have enacted laws requiring students to pass competency examinations to become eligible for a high school diploma.

Although complex findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) point to no consistent trend in reading achievement scores, the public has been quick to conclude from these reports that achievement levels are falling and that American schools are not doing their job. Increasingly, as parents and community leaders judge quality in education primarily on the basis of standardized test scores, educators across the country are being pressured to increase these scores regardless of the impact on the total educational fabric. This climate, particularly since publication of the Nation at Risk report, has led to "band-aid" remedies such as longer school days or more homework without any careful consideration of the quality or effectiveness of that extra time when it comes to actual learning. In reaction to such "quick fox" reactions, professional educators need to remind the public that still too little is understood about how reading comprehension tests work, how the various types of comprehension tests (multiple choice, cloze, fill-in) differ from each other in what they presuppose and measure, and in what they really tell us about a student's ability to comprehend and reason.

The public will no doubt continue to expect that educational progress and individual development be measured and reported. In a very critical way, assessments and evaluations are an integral component of the instructional enterprise. Yet, if tests are to be useful, and not destructive of learning, certain basic issues must be agreed upon by the developers, users, and interpreters of test results. This, however, appears to be precisely where dialogue has broken down.

Together, test developers, users, and interpreters need to carefully consider
test results from a variety of perspectives. (1) What has been taught in the curriculum? (2) What has the student learned from the curriculum? (3) What are the reasons for testing? (4) How do the testing conditions for the student vary depending upon the kind of test being used? (5) What differing kinds of thinking, reasoning, and knowledge are required to succeed in different kinds of tests? (6) What are the limitations of any single test measure? (7) How do we avoid having tests restrict the range and depth of what is taught in the curriculum?

These issues are particularly critical because during the past two decades much research has increased our understanding of cognitive processing, language learning, and reading comprehension. This research demonstrates that student performance is affected by: (1) the particular topic; (2) the language and structure of the passage, the questions asked relating to the passage, and the indicated mode of response; (3) the expectations, knowledge, and experiences of the individual student; and (4) the environment and general communicative context of the test.

Unfortunately, just as researchers have begun to question the appropriateness of many tests in telling us something critical about reading comprehension, educational reliance upon test results has increased. Langer, in her report of a two-year research project which examined the strategies students use to comprehend and answer questions from selected norm-based, standardized, multiple-choice test items, suggests caution in using the results of such tests to make decisions about any individual's performance or ability. From her detailed interview procedures, she discovered that all too frequently students select the "right" answer for the wrong reasons, or the "wrong" answer for the right reasons. Even more disturbing, sometimes they never have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the passage at all. Langer concluded that such tests appear to have become a "genre" unto themselves and although successful performance on these items may in some way be related to comprehension ability, the tests themselves do not directly measure the processes involved in the development of reading comprehension nor do they evaluate an individual student's ability to manage the comprehension processes.

A study completed recently by the Center for the Study of Evaluation gives us further reason to question the growing reliance upon test scores. Using a large randomly selected national population, the study concludes that both teachers and principals regard standardized tests to be less useful than more locally developed evaluation procedures such as teacher-made tests based upon what the teacher has actually been teaching. Further, both teachers and principals regard the results of these tests as less useful than non-test data (such as student classwork and teacher observation) in making judgments about a student's achievement. These findings, again, provide reason for educators to reconsider their reactions to the trend toward great reliance on standardized test results for educational decision making.

As educators responsible for the integrated development of student
literacy, we must continually guard against the assumptions and misconceptions that surround standardized testing in the language arts. Many assumptions stem directly from the misconception that a single measure can adequately capture an individual's abilities, especially for complex cognitive tasks such as those involved in critical thinking and language use. Frequent test abuses include: (1) interpretation of the scores on a particular test as if the test items invoke comparable understandings and strategies from each member of the population being tested; (2) interpretation of the scores across different kinds of tests as if the test type (multiple choice, fill-in, cloze) or subtest title (comprehension, vocabulary, language) make similar literacy demands on the test taker; (3) potential limitation of the teacher's curriculum options—leading to teaching to the test, not the child; and (4) potential inappropriate decisions regarding class placement, instructional needs, promotion, and the loss of creativity and spontaneity in those classrooms where raising test scores is the dominant curriculum concern.

All of us in the field of education have an obligation to speak out against the growing reliance on standardized test data and to urge instead a widespread mandate to use data from multiple sources, both formal and informal, in the evaluation of student and school performance. Further, even while more is being learned about the experiential, cognitive and contextual variables that affect test-taking, we must insist that teacher judgment remains the key factor in assessing student performance and making subsequent educational decisions.

Besides speaking out on these issues, we must also look for long-range solutions. It is critical that educational researchers and teachers work collaboratively to codify into a manageable framework the valuable observations, insights, and judgments teachers make on a daily basis as both they and their students engage in the real-life business of learning. Only in this way will educational "managers" as well as the general public come to appreciate the fact that even the most sophisticated tests fall short of capturing the complexities of the processes of comprehending and learning.

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Judith Langer teaches at Stanford University and is co-editor of NCTE's Research in the Teaching of English. Gordon Pradl teaches at New York University. Both are members of NCTE's Commission on Reading.

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