

Preface

Educational testing has not been a lifelong interest of mine. Indeed, not until midcareer did I devote any serious thinking to the care and feeding of educational tests. Let me explain. Near the close of my college days as a philosophy major, I discovered that the workplace was not eager to hire novice Aristotelian philosophers. Accordingly, with no job prospects before me, I decided to stay in college for an extra year, earn a teaching credential, and then try to land a job as a high school teacher. I should confess, at that time, I found small children to be thoroughly repellant. Consequently, becoming an elementary teacher was definitely not in the cards. Nonetheless, the idea of teaching adolescents seemed potentially endurable.

Soon, I found myself enrolled in a seriously shabby teacher-education program—a program that taught me next to nothing about how to teach. As that teacher-education travesty was nearing its conclusion, I found myself assigned to serve as a student teacher under the guidance of a marvelous supervising teacher. Out there in the real world, she tossed me enough instructional rope so that I made it through my student-teaching assignment. Then, after a couple of happy years teaching high school in eastern Oregon, I enrolled in a doctoral program at Indiana University where I majored in instructional procedures—a program designed to make me a teacher educator who could supply prospective teachers with accurate insights about instruction.

And that's where the first half of my career was centered, as a teacher educator in the UCLA Graduate School of Education providing instructional strategies and tactics to would-be teachers. Moreover, I really enjoyed trying to train prospective teachers—sometimes almost a thousand per year—hoping to supply them with the tools they'd need to become instructional superstars.

But in the late 1970s, many of my former UCLA students—the ones who had been teaching for a while—began telling me that although they were trying to implement the instructional techniques I'd been touting, their instruction was becoming more heavily influenced by the need to have their students succeed on upcoming, important educational tests. After a number of such conversations with my former students, I became convinced that if genuinely significant consequences were going to be based on students' test scores, then whatever was measured by those tests would surely be stressed instructionally. Whether a test's results were being used to evaluate a state's schools or to determine the awarding of a student's high school diploma, the significance of high-import tests had transformed those educational tests into powerful curricular magnets.

With this recognition regarding the curricular impact of educational tests, and a realization that most of the tests being used in our schools had not been fashioned by individuals who knew all that much about instruction, I consciously decided to make a shift in my career path, turning from an emphasis on instruction toward a focus on educational measurement. Much measurement-related reading and studying followed, for I really needed to learn about educational testing pretty much from scratch. For the last three decades, then, I've attempted to center most of my thinking, speaking, and writing on educational testing—what it is, how it is used, and how it can be improved.

EDUCATIONAL TESTS: POTENT TOOLS

After just a few years pursuing this new focus, I arrived at a significant conclusion that I still believe to be true. In a nutshell, it is that educational testing constitutes the most cost-effective way to improve our schools. From an *instructional* perspective, a well-formed educational test can provide teachers with needed clarity regarding the specific skills and knowledge they wish to promote for the students in their classrooms. Test-clarified curricular targets can help teachers devise more accurately targeted instructional activities. Turning from instruction to *evaluation*, the use of appropriate educational tests can contribute to sound decisions regarding how successful a teacher's instruction activities actually were. That is, which instructional segments worked well, which instructional segments were so-so, and which instructional segments simply flopped?

Educational testing constitutes the most cost-effective way to improve our schools.

When there are *any* significant consequences associated with a test's usage, then what's tested will almost certainly be taught. And because the dominant factor we employ to evaluate instruction has sensibly been students' learning, then the tests we employ must be suitable for that mission. Tawdry tests, when used for instruction or evaluation, can have seriously harmful effects on the way our children are educated. Terrific tests, however, can have a decisively positive impact on teaching and learning. And if you consider the often non-trivial costs associated with many improvement-focused educational strategies—such as reducing class sizes—then the cost-effectiveness of excellent educational testing becomes apparent.

UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL TESTING'S BASICS

If well-formed educational tests can have a beneficial impact on the way we educate our children, then more people need to know how to distinguish between educational tests that are wonderful from those that are woeful. But, currently, most of us are busy. Consequently, a common response from educators—and even from parents who have children in school—is to “leave educational testing to the specialists.” After all, busy educators and busy parents reasonably assume that the tests being used in our schools are appropriate. What I’ve learned during the past thirty years, however, is that many of the tests currently used in this nation are flat-out wrong for their intended measurement missions.

Accordingly, I wrote this book with the explicit intention of translating seemingly off-putting technical notions into more accessible language. In this book you will encounter nine key assessment-related understandings. You’ll find one of these understandings presented in every chapter’s wrap-up section called *Takeaway Time*. Each understanding encapsulates the most important thing I hope you’ll take away from that particular chapter. If you spend time to master those nine understandings, then *you* can be in a position to have an influence on the educational tests of concern to you. In the book’s final chapter you’ll be presented with a set of potential action options that you might wish to undertake as a consequence of your increased understandings regarding educational testing. The book can be read solo or it can form the grist for a study group during which the content of the book’s chapters—at a group-determined pace—can be considered.

In an attempt to support readers as they wrestle with this book, after I had written it, I bopped out an *Online Supplement* containing a set of additional activities for each of its ten chapters. Most helpful, I suspect, for groups engaged in a collaborative study of the book’s issues, the materials in the supplement can also be used by solo readers. In addition, there are separate Prefaces to the *Online Supplement* for each

of the book's five audiences. The *Online Supplement* can be obtained gratis via the publisher's website (<http://resources.corwin.com/PophamABCsTesting>).

I am not suggesting that every reader of this rather short book should then be regarded as a measurement specialist. However, if you have grasped the book's nine understandings, or almost all of them, then you will be in a position to enlist the services of a measurement specialist who can be tasked with supplying a *plain-language* report to those concerned.

As you wander your way through the book's ten tantalizing chapters, you'll sometimes encounter technical terms. Because, as you'll see in the book, a few of those terms are employed in what might seem to be a counterintuitive fashion by the measurement community. Accordingly, I have provided a glossary at the close of this book, which contains brief definitions of the book's terms identified in an *italicized and boldface* font. Educational testing is laden with no more jargon than any other specialization, and you'll quickly see that most of the terms that you encounter in the glossary actually describe very commonsense concepts or procedures. In the days ahead, if you know you're going to take part in any kind of "real world" formal or informal discussion regarding educational testing, a rapid review of the glossary's definitions might come in handy. No one, after all, wants to be regarded as having tumbled from testing's turnip truck.

There's also an index at the close of the book, but its story line is even less entrancing than what's found in the glossary. Nor, indeed, will you be able to rely on the book's index as a teaching tool—unless you happen to be working with someone who is alphabetically challenged.

I hope this preface makes clear how critical educational testing is in the education of children. If the book itself helps you grasp testing's importance, perhaps what you've learned will incline you to help improve whatever educational testing is going on around you. Improved educational testing unarguably translates into improved education for our students.

W.J.P.